

NBA PREVIEW

2016-17

OCTOBER 24-31, 2016

Double Issue

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RUSSELL WESTBROOK

He's Now OKC's
Leading Man.
And He's All In

BY LEE JENKINS

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The Franchise

Introducing
THE CROSSOVER
The Game. The Life. The Stories.
SI.com/thecrossover

Kevin Love
Is The Stopper

P. 64

Scouting Reports
SI's Title Pick: Warriors

P. 70

SI's Top 100
*The Updated List
(Sorry, DeMar)*

P. 94



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AND STYLE.
*THEY COME
IN PAIRS.*

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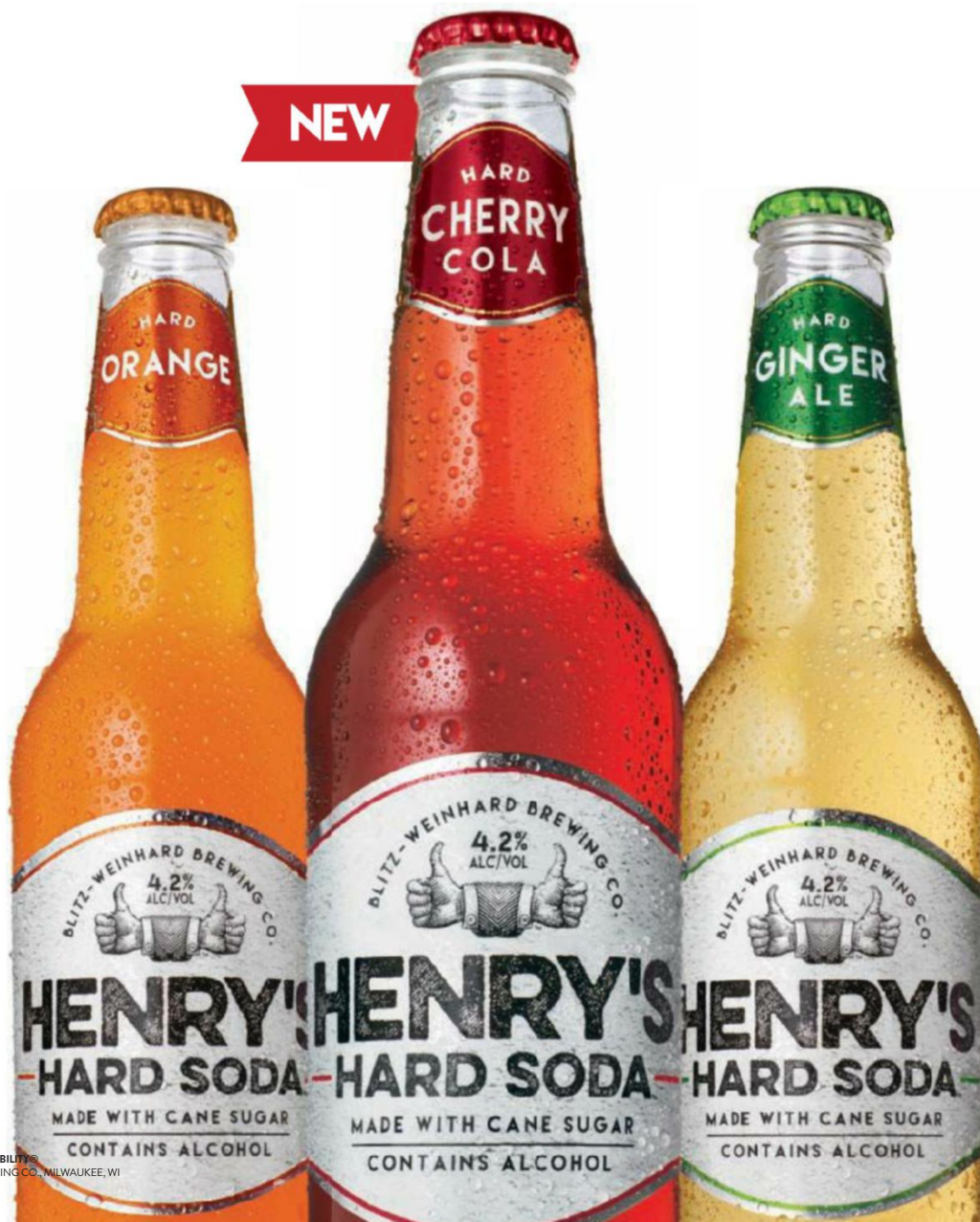
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By Pete Thamel

LINEUP

10.24-10.31.16

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The point guard has gone all in on his commitment to the new-look Thunder

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Dwyane Wade:
Why the Windy City
native always knew he'd
become a Bull

GOLDEN ERA

Behind the thrilling play of Steph Curry & Co., the Warriors should win the Western Conference for the third straight season.

Photograph by
JOHN W. McDONOUGH

ON THE COVER:

Photo Illustration by STEPHEN SKALOCKY
Photograph by ROBERT BECK
Background by GREG NELSON



"I think he's going to bring a much more enthusiastic attitude to our team."

—Dominique Wilkins

I think he's going to bring a much more enthusiastic attitude to our team.

MG: What do you think the biggest obstacle will be for the Cavs to repeat as champs?

DW: Everyone is chasing them. It's always tougher that second year because you've got a target on your back.

MG: With Kevin Durant moving to Golden State, do you think they will be better than the LeBron–Dwyane Wade–Chris Bosh trio that we saw in Miami?

DW: That Miami team had some big [guys] who could play and defend the basket. Offensively the Warriors are definitely better with Kevin Durant, but they lost a lot of key big people on defense. They have too many shooters on that team, so somebody is going to have to sacrifice his offense for the betterment of the team. I think it's going to have to be Klay Thompson. □

For more of Wilkins's interview, plus the SI Now archives, go to **SI.com/sinow**

DOMINIQUE WILKINS

The Hall of Famer and Hawks vice president of operations discusses expectations for free-agent arrival Dwight Howard in Atlanta and what Kevin Durant will mean for the Warriors.

MAGGIE GRAY: Do you expect Dwight Howard to lead the Hawks to a championship?

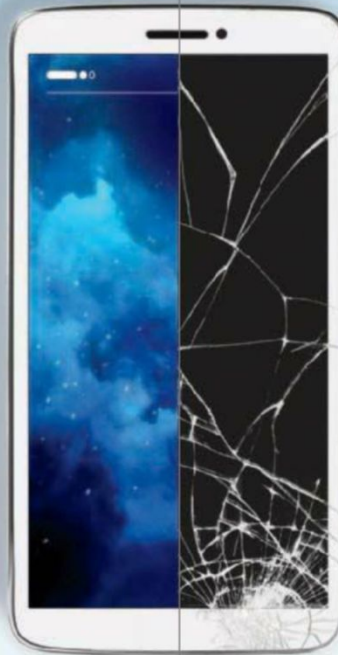
DOMINIQUE WILKINS: We always expect a player of his caliber to come in and take the team to that next level, but you don't want to look too far ahead because the players are going to have to build chemistry. It's a

new team, new structure, new system. Once he gets used to it, I think he's going to do outstanding in this program. We're fortunate to have him. He's going to bring a bit more physicality, better rebounding and better defense.

MG: What do you think was the biggest factor in

the team going from Al Horford [who, after nine seasons, left the Hawks for the Celtics] to a question mark in Dwight Howard?

DW: I don't think it's a question mark. If you look at his past, even on teams where he wasn't very happy or they didn't give him the ball much, he was still averaging around 13 or 14 points a game and 12 rebounds. For a lot of guys, that's All-Star status.



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INBOX

FOR OCT. 10, 2016



Kudos to Carli Lloyd for having the courage to go public with her struggle to become an independent young woman, as well as a top-level professional athlete (*At Any Cost*). This is a must-read for parents who live vicariously through their children. I hope one day Carli and her family can reconnect.

Steven P. Macomber, Whitinsville, Mass.

Early in the excerpt **Lloyd** recalls her trainer, **James Galanis**, telling her, "You make excuses and find people to blame. You always have a reason things aren't working out, instead of making them work out." It sounds as if she continues to do that off the field. Stewart Hiatt, Kernersville, N.C.



The Ryder Cup showed that expressed emotion, both on the part of players and fans, makes for a more interesting event (*Leading Off*). The PGA Tour needs to move away from its staid, unemotional practices and allow for more fun.

Larry Siewart, Milwaukee

I appreciated **Doug Baldwin's** saying (*Scorecard*), "I try to gain as much knowledge as I can and listen to people because I don't know what I don't know." That seems like a better approach than seeing a news clip and then fighting injustice by joining a protest, ambushing police and vandalizing a city.

Brian Hensley
Roscommon, Mich.



COVER

What a great retro cover. Sadly, though, I found Tom Verducci's piece on the **Cubs' Renaissance** (*Ghostbusters*) filled with talk of Run Production Coordinators and shifting versus positioning anything but retro.

Karl Cicitto
West Suffield, Conn.

PAGE 20

SCORECARD

Reading about **Sparks** forward **Nneka Ogwumike's** impressive season, I thought she deserved to be on your cover. If it were a man with those outstanding stats, I'm certain he would be.

Emmanuel Segun
Livermore, Calif.



PAGE 60

POINT AFTER

Wendel Clark's letter to **Auston Matthews** was wonderful. Though I'm a die-hard **Rangers** fan, I always enjoyed watching Clark play and hope Matthews heeds his advice.

Paul Alteri
Watertown, N.Y.

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3Leading
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Pinch Perfect

■ Miguel Montero took a curtain call at Wrigley Field last Saturday after his eighth-inning, pinch-hit, tie-breaking grand slam, which lifted the Cubs to a 7-3 win over the Dodgers in Game 1 of the NLCS. He joined the Reds' Mark Lewis (1995 NLDS) and the Yankees' Ricky Ledee ('99 ALCS) as the only players with pinch-hit slams in the postseason.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
STACY REVERE
GETTY IMAGES

PATRICK GORSKI/
ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES









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2
3**Leading
Off**

Hold That Tiger

■ Patriots cornerback Eric Rowe broke up a pass to Bengals wide receiver A.J. Green in the end zone during the second half of New England's 35-17 victory in Foxborough on Sunday. The victory brought the Pats' record to 5-1, while Cincinnati fell to 2-4. Green, who entered the game averaging 103.6 receiving yards, finished with six catches for 88 yards and no touchdowns.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
STEVEN SENNE

AP





+

33



Leading Off

Soar Spot

■ In the Red Bull Rampage, a free-ride mountain bike competition last week in Virgin, Utah, riders design their own courses, choosing ones that reduce speed, ensure safety and preclude dramatic photography. Or not. Kurt Sorge, 27, of Nelson, B.C., finished fourth in the event in which riders are judged on the boldness of their lines, the quality of their skills and the complexity of their tricks. First place went to Brandon Semenuk, 25, of Whistler, B.C.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ERICK W. RASCO

THE CROSSOVER

Hoop for Thought

BY CHRISTIAN STONE



Jack McCallum was in the office last week, which occasioned the retelling of my favorite McCallum story, immortalized by our mutual friend and colleague Alex Wolff in *Big Game, Small World: A Basketball Adventure*. It was 1999, and Alex was in Bhutan reporting for the book. He was greeted by Karma Lam Dorji of the country's basketball federation in a state of near rapture: "SPORTS ILLUSTRATED! Do you know this Jack McCallum? His stories about the playoffs are so good, I think it is almost better to read his descriptions than to be there oneself."

Two years ago, when the idea of a basketball-only website was first floated here, I suggested that it be called McCallum, a riff off the late great site Grantland. I was only half joking; Jack is a Hall of Fame storyteller (literally so), whose ability to bring this most beautiful of games to life on the page is surpassed only by his less-fit-to-print outtakes, shared over multiple pints. (Jack's on Twitter. If you ask real nice, perhaps someday he'll give up the Darren Daye foot massage story from the late 1980s.)

It is in that tradition that we are launching The Crossover, sponsored by the good folks at State Farm (also a sponsor of the site's spiritual brother, Peter King's NFL-focused Monday Morning Quarterback). Starting with the legendary Frank Deford in the 1960s, when pro hoops

still took a distant backseat to baseball, pro football, golf and, it would appear, car safety (a three-part series in '61!), and carried on by McCallum, Phil Taylor, Chris Ballard and Lee Jenkins, NBA storytelling in these pages and across all of SI's platforms has been the industry standard.

The Crossover, too, is intended to, as its name suggests, strike a balance with other, complementary storytelling, shorter in form and more lifestyle-based. The anchor of the site's launch is this week's cover story on Russell Westbrook, who along with his former running mate, Kevin Durant, will be the league's most scrutinized players this season. Westbrook embodies the ultimate crossover personality, a fascinating on-court performer who, through his fashion initiatives, has carved out a space in the broader cultural conversation (*top*). Both angles are covered, exhaustively and entertainingly.

One of the great successes of TheMMQB.com will also be true of The Crossover: the ability of featured athletes to present themselves as something more than sports figures. Hoop for Thought is an internal motto of the site. Dwyane Wade opens a window into his decision to leave behind 13 years in Miami to play in his hometown of Chicago. There are basketball reasons for the move, but there is a more personal explanation too. Celtics center Kelly Olynyk was in the building last week; he's an



What will also be true of The Crossover: the ability of athletes to present themselves as more than sports figures.

aspiring sushi chef and, under the expert eyes of two *itamae* from New York's popular Blue Ribbon Sushi Bar, offered a glimpse of what his post-playing career might look like (*bottom*).

There will be a rich range of voices: smart, funny, analytic, social, literary. "Lee [Jenkins] and Chris [Ballard] are two of the best feature writers in all of journalism," says Matt Dollinger,

who will be the lead editor on the site. "Ben Golliver and Rob Mahoney provide unparalleled in-depth analysis. Andrew Sharp and Rohan Nadkarni are as adept with analytics as they are with GIFs. And we have a deep trove of contributors—Jon Wertheim, Richard Deitsch, Michael McCann, Jeremy Woo and Jarrel Harris."

There is no sport—and this point is inarguable to me—that generates a more spirited (and rational) Internet conversation than basketball. It has the best longform storytelling, the most organic connection to pop culture and the most relatable, progressive discussions around analytics. Similarly, the NBA itself has the best, most open-minded leadership (and it's really not even close), with a curiously rare understanding of the marketability and value of its players. It is again, as it was in the 1980s and for much of the '90s, on the leading edge.

It is the perfect time to launch The Crossover. □

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Edited by JIM GORANT + TED KEITH



Foul Language

The football field is a cauldron of heated rhetoric, but the n-word in particular has drawn attention from the league

BY JONATHAN JONES

WHILE MERCILESS

taunting and sexually suggestive celebrations have become embarrassments to the NFL this year, the league has for the last two seasons been emphasizing a different type of inappropriate behavior that can result in a 15-yard penalty.

Two years ago—following a push by the Fritz Pollard Alliance, a group named for the man who became the first African-American coach in the NFL, in 1921, and

advocates for the hiring of minorities for NFL coaching positions—the league took a firmer stance on players using the n-word on the field: Under the abusive language section of unsportsmanlike conduct, which covers things said “to opponents, teammates, officials or representatives of the League,” referees could levy a 15-yard penalty when they heard the word.

The rule book has long stated that “using

abusive, threatening, or insulting language or gestures” could result in an unsportsmanlike-conduct penalty. In 2014 abusive language was further defined by the competition committee to include “the use of abusive, obscene or racially and sexually charged language.”

There are only two known cases of officials penalizing players for using the word—49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick (who denied

saying it) and Buccaneers receiver Louis Murphy, both in 2014. An NFL spokesman declined to say how many times players have been flagged for using the n-word, but while there were 20 penalties for abusive language in 2014 and 15 in '15, through Week 5 this year there had been nine such penalties. Two former officials who are still connected to the NFL said they're unaware of any other flags having been thrown for use of

that word, and they say that current officials tell them that the word's use on the field has decreased significantly.

Still, the threat of a penalty has not discouraged players from using the word.

"It's [said] all the time," says Carolina fullback Mike Tolbert, who is black. "The only way that it gets called is if the referee is right up on you and you say it to the person. But we say it on the field all the time, to be honest. We say it to each other. You run somebody over, and you talk trash, and they talk trash back. It's part of [the game]."

The word is one of the most freighted in the English language. Long used to oppress African-Americans, the word was adopted by them in recent

79, who played guard for Cleveland and Washington from 1959 to '68. In '67, Wooten was one of several black athletes, including Jim Brown, who supported Muhammad Ali's opposition to the Vietnam War at a summit in Cleveland.

"The word was created to make people of color feel that they were inferior in every sense of the word," says Wooten. "That's what the word meant. And that word cannot be defended."

Gerry Austin spent 25 years as an NFL official before joining ESPN's *Monday Night Football* crew as a rules analyst in 2012. He says one current official told him that he gave a black player a warning about using the word. The player replied that he was "talking to a brother."

"And the official said, 'If you don't want to be called

an African-American player during a game. But in 2013 then Eagles receiver Riley Cooper, who is white, was caught by a cellphone camera telling a security guard at a Kenny Chesney concert that he'd "fight every n----- here." He returned to his job and a mostly black locker room with no suspension, only a modest fine, and was forced to attend sensitivity training. That same year it was revealed during a broader investigation into bullying by then Dolphins guard Richie Incognito, who is white, toward teammate Jonathan Martin, who is black, that Incognito had used the word in messages to Martin. Incognito was suspended for three months as a result of the investigation.

Tolbert says he has never heard the word used in a defamatory way on the field, and if it were ever directed at him, he implied that he would react in such a way that he would wind up being ejected.

Two-thirds of the players in the league are black. Even if the NFL does everything it can, is it possible to eliminate the use of the word on the football field?

"It may not be able to be eradicated in the league," Wooten says. "But I think that officials should continue to make the call. When they hear it, whatever its intent, there's no excuse. If you hear the word and you hear who used the word, throw the flag immediately." □

"We say it on the field all the time, to be honest. It's part of [the game]."

—Panthers fullback Mike Tolbert

decades and the ending changed from *-ger* to *-ga*, and it has even become a term of endearment from one African-American to another. "Growing up as an '80s baby," says Tolbert, who was born in 1985 in Carrollton, Ga., "the word has been desensitized."

But John Wooten, chairman of the Fritz Pollard Alliance, disagrees. "Don't say that to me. That is a cop-out," says Wooten,

that by a white player, then you shouldn't want to be called that [by anyone], because it's a derogatory remark. So knock it off," says Austin. "It doesn't matter who is saying it to whom. [The NFL] wants that eliminated. They want the n-word to go away."

There have been no reported examples in recent years of a white NFL player using the word in a derogatory way toward



GO FIGURE

4

Consecutive games with 130 or more rushing yards by Dallas running back **Ezekiel Elliott**, for an NFL rookie record. Elliott had 157 yards on 28 carries on Sunday in the Cowboys' 30-16 win over Green Bay at Lambeau Field.

700

Wins in franchise history, including the postseason, for the Giants, who became the third NFL team to reach that milestone with Sunday's 27-23 victory over the Ravens. The Bears (759) and the Packers (754) are the others.

4:32

Time, in hours and minutes, of NLDS Game 5, a 4-3 win for the Dodgers over the Nationals on Oct. 13. It is the longest nine-inning postseason game in history.





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Dennis Byrd

1966–2016

LATE IN THE 1992 NFL season, Jets defensive lineman Dennis Byrd was partially paralyzed after colliding with a teammate in a game against the Chiefs. In the weeks after, SI asked me to write a story about why New York wept for Byrd, why the outpouring of emotion for him was so intense as he lay in a hospital bed, a halo



brace screwed into his skull, trying to move a toe even one centimeter. “I am glad God chose me for this, because

I have the strength to handle it,” the humble native of Oklahoma City said, in a message delivered by his wife, Angela, to a waiting city.

Last Saturday, Byrd, 50, was killed in a head-on crash on Oklahoma Highway 88. He leaves behind

Angela and four children—and a giving legacy on and off the field.

Byrd, who would regain the use of his legs, had an impressive 27 sacks in a three-year period before his injury. “As great a player as he was,” friend and former teammate Marvin Washington said on Sunday, “he was a better person.” Late for a team meeting once because he wouldn’t stop signing autographs, Byrd said, “The day I don’t have time to sign an autograph for a kid is the day I get out of football.”

After my story appeared in SI, I got a letter from a minister in the South. He had read my piece the day he normally wrote his sermon. He stopped writing, then read my story from the pulpit instead. It’s the highlight of my 36-year writing career. I owe it to the goodness of a man I barely knew. —Peter King

Past Perfect

Reconsidering the '45 champs

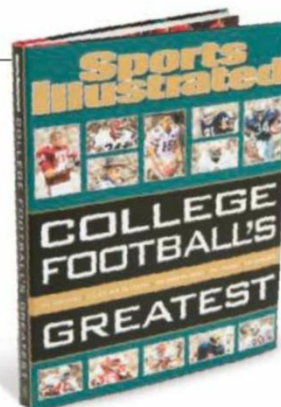
IF THE 1945 Oklahoma State football team had peered into a crystal ball 71 years ago, they’d have seen a “crystal ball” national championship trophy landing in Stillwater in 2016. Despite finishing fifth in the AP poll, the undefeated '45 Cowboys—known then as the Oklahoma A&M Aggies—were awarded the title last week by the American Football Coaches Association.



Alas, this was not a singular achievement. The AFCA also offered 1945 crowns to fellow undefeateds Army (the AP winner) and Alabama, though neither school has yet accepted its trophy. “The idea is to recognize them all as champions,” said AFCA executive director emeritus Grant Teaff, who insisted they won’t be considered co-champions.

Why now? The association was founded in 1922 but didn’t start awarding championships until 1950, so it’s playing catch up, using its crystal ball to look into the past.

—Larry Flynn



School Book

Every debate about college football settled? Yeah, right

SI's latest *Greatest* book runs through the top 10s of college football—programs, coaches, players by position, etc. (available Oct. 18). Here is our expert committee's take on the Top 10 Bowl Games.

10. **1965 Orange Bowl**
Texas 21, Alabama 17

9. **2003 Fiesta Bowl**
Ohio State 31, Miami 24

8. **1987 Fiesta Bowl**
Penn State 14, Miami 10

7. **1980 Holiday Bowl**
BYU 46, SMU 45

6. **1979 Cotton Bowl**
Notre Dame 35, Houston 34

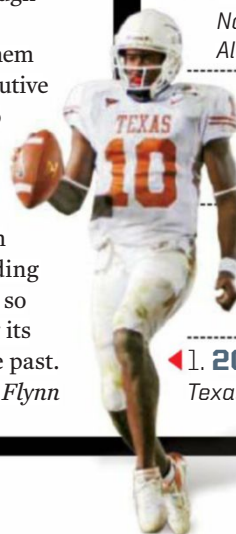
5. **1979 Sugar Bowl**
Alabama 14, Penn State 7

4. **1973 Sugar Bowl**
Notre Dame 24, Alabama 23

3. **2007 Fiesta Bowl**
Boise State 43, Oklahoma 42

2. **1984 Orange Bowl**
Miami 31, Nebraska 30

1. **2006 Rose Bowl**
Texas 41, USC 38





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THE AVERAGE

NBA player spends \$42,500 a month—a big chunk of that on clothes and shoes—according to a study released in June by wealth management company Personal Capital. So it's no surprise that players have transformed the cinder-block hallways of arenas into fashion runways before games. Look to these four stars, in particular, to flash their fashion sense this season.

—Jamie Lisanti



Russell Westbrook THUNDER

The self-dubbed #fashionking was a staple at New York Fashion Week in September, and judging by his front-row attire, animal prints will run wild in Oklahoma City this season. He gives new meaning to big game.

James Harden ROCKETS

Harden already sports a built-in accessory—it's sprouting from his face—but he also knows how to add bold touches to his already flashy looks: gold chains, felt hats, spiked sneakers, etc. His entrances are hard to ignore.

Andre Iguodala WARRIORS

For Iguodala, fashion is a family affair. He consults his wife, Christina, for style advice and often poses for a postgame snap with his son, Andre Jr., 9, at Oracle Arena to show off their father-son, fashion-forward look.

LeBron James CAVALIERS

King James has always had a style rep to uphold, but this season he has a championship to defend as well. So in 2016, he'll have a little extra swagger to go with his sophisticated look, often accessorized with shades and headphones.



SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

When asked if he'd attended the Paul McCartney concert at the Golden 1 Center, Kings center DeMarcus Cousins admitted he doesn't know who McCartney is.

Javier Baez

The Cubs 2B has stolen home, been slick in the field and gotten clutch hits. He may not end up Chicago's hero, but he won't be the goat.



HOT ▲
NOT ▼



Nevada

The state senate approved a tax hike to fund an NFL stadium in Las Vegas. Finally, there'll be something fun to do there.

THEY SAID IT



"I THINK WE'VE ALL, AT SOME POINT OR ANOTHER, HAD A DRONE-RELATED PROBLEM."

Terry Francona // Indians manager, after pitcher Trevor Bauer had to have his start moved back because he lacerated his pinkie fixing a drone.



A full-page photograph of Michael Strahan sitting in a large, dark brown leather armchair. He is wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a light blue and white striped dress shirt and a purple and white plaid tie. His hands are clasped in his lap, and he is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a dark, vertically striped wall.

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TRIBUTE

Long May You Ride

■ **Professional** skateboarder Dylan Rieder, who burst onto the scene at 13, when he won the 2001 Damn Am contest, died of complications of leukemia on Oct. 12 in Duarte, Calif. He was 28. He turned pro at 18 and starred in many videos, making his debut in *Transworld Skateboarding's* "A Time to Shine" and winning the magazine's 2015 award for Best Part in "Cherry," a short put out by his sponsor, Supreme. The Westminister, Calif., native also influenced skater style through his look; his store, The Hunt, in New York City; and his work as a model, including a DKNY ad campaign in '14. "He had style and grace that most of us can only wish for," skate legend Tony Hawk told SI's sister publication PEOPLE. —A.F.

**Jarred Kelenic** | *Waukesha, Wis.* | *Baseball*

Jarred, a junior outfielder and lefthander at Waukesha West High, homered to lead the U.S. to a 6-1 win over Cuba for a sixth straight Pan American AAA Championship gold medal, in Monterrey, Mexico. He also had two doubles, two triples and seven RBIs in 27 at bats for a .407 batting average and MVP honors. Jarred has committed to Louisville.

**Lexi Sun** | *Encinitas, Calif.* | *Volleyball*

Lexi, a 6' 2" senior outside hitter at Santa Fe Christian School in Solana Beach, had a match-high 16 kills to lift the Eagles to a 25-23, 25-12 win over host West Hills High for the Fall Classic Gold Division title. In July she led the U.S. junior team to silver at the U-20 championships for North and Central America and the Caribbean. She will play at Texas.

**Patrick Fernandez** | *Surprise, Ariz.* | *Golf*

Patrick, a junior at Raymond S. Kellis High in Glendale, combined with his Champions tour professional partner, Michael Allen, to shoot an 18-under 197 to win the Pro-Junior title at the Nature Valley First Tee Open at Pebble Beach. In the better-ball format, Patrick contributed the low score on 14 out of 54 holes.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by ALEXANDRA FENWICK

**Ashley Hatch** | *Gilbert, Ariz.* | *Soccer*

Hatch, a senior forward at BYU, had her second hat trick this season in a 4-0 win over San Francisco; her first came in August, in a 3-2 victory over reigning national champ Penn State. The NCAA leader in goals (15) through Sunday, she was invited to the U.S.'s training camp before a pair of matches against Switzerland this week.

**Joe Benedict** | *Sandy Creek, N.Y.* | *Football*

Joe, a junior running back at Sandy Creek High, rushed for a state-record 584 yards and had eight touchdowns in a 53-34 victory over Immaculate Heart Central High. The previous mark, set in 2007, was 569 yards. The runner-up at 195 pounds at the 2016 state wrestling meet, Joe has 2,045 yards on 188 carries with 30 TDs in seven games.

**Ena Shibahara and Jada Hart**
Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif.; Colton, Calif. | *Tennis*

UCLA freshmen Hart and Shibahara edged fellow Americans Kayla Day and Caroline Dolehide in a super tiebreaker (4-6, 6-4, 13-11) to win the junior girls' doubles crown at the U.S. Open last month. The duo dropped just two sets en route to the title and upset the No. 1 seeds in the first round of play.

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A SHOWDOWN FOR SKIN SUPREMACY

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JUST MY TYPE

→ Interview by **DAN PATRICK**

DAN PATRICK: [Including the first five games of this season], you had 43 TD passes since the beginning of 2015—most in the league.

That's impressive. How are you different now than in your rookie year?

DEREK CARR:

Oh, man.

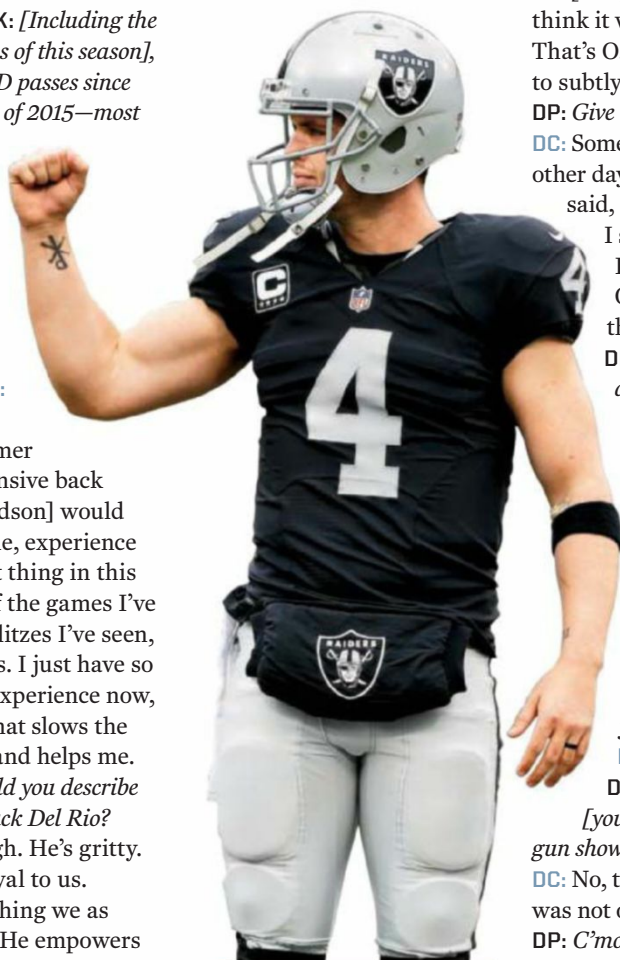
C-Wood [former Raiders defensive back Charles Woodson] would always tell me, experience is the biggest thing in this league. All of the games I've played, the blitzes I've seen, the coverages. I just have so much more experience now, and that's what slows the game down and helps me.

DP: How would you describe your coach, Jack Del Rio?

DC: He's tough. He's gritty. He is very loyal to us. That's something we as players love. He empowers our whole offense.

DP: What's the confidence jolt like when he says, "Go for it" on fourth down?

DC: It's so funny because I am starting to think just like him. Late in the game against the Chargers [in Week 5], I was thinking he's gonna let us go for it [on fourth and short]. Sure enough, he waved off the kicker and I started to smile.



DEREK CARR

CARR JACKED

Despite putting up his own big numbers—on the scoreboard and in the weight room—the 25-year-old quarterback, now in his third season in Oakland, is still mistaken for his older brother David.

DP: How often are you referred to as your brother, [former NFL quarterback] David?

DC: [Laughs.] A lot. I don't think it will ever stop.

That's O.K. I've learned to subtly correct people.

DP: Give me an example.

DC: Someone drove by the other day and stopped. He said, "David Carr?"

I said, "No, I'm Derek, but that's O.K." He said, "Yeah, that's what I meant."

DP: So he wasn't disappointed?

DC: Oh, yeah, he was. He was looking for Raiders quarterback David Carr. He just had to realize that wasn't happening.

DP: Do you pick out the photos for your Twitter page?

DC: Yes.

DP: Did you go with [your arms and] the gun show on purpose?

DC: No, that definitely was not on purpose.

DP: C'mon, you're showing off the guns. You're looking like [Tim] Tebow.

DC: Yes. Everyone always gets on me about it. [Former defensive end] Justin Tuck played with David [with the Giants], and he used to say, "Your brother is more jacked than you." He would tell me that every time we were in the weight room. Well, now I'll show [Tuck] a picture like that to make him laugh. □

GUEST SHOTS SAY WHAT?



I asked Hall of Fame quarterback **Steve**

Young if Tom Brady had surpassed Joe Montana on the list of all-time greats.

"No," he said. "Joe did things you can't even imagine. Tom would definitely say the same thing." ... Colts punter **Pat McAfee**



explained why kickers such as him are

taking a new approach to fitness. "There's only 32 jobs in the league," he said. "Guys are trying to get an edge, so they're working out. You have to be athletic to be good at this." ... Golf Channel's **Brandel**

Chamblee told me that



he thinks Tiger Woods is being

cautious about his return to golf because he doesn't want to go out on an embarrassing note. "Imagine if when [Brett] Favre played for the Jets or the Vikings [in his final years], he threw it into the stands on a quick out. That would be his legacy. I'm sure that's in the back of Tiger's mind."

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The Case for ...

Showing Off the Kids

BY ALEX PREWITT

ON OCT. 13, the morning after the NHL's 2016–17 regular season officially began, commissioner Gary Bettman received an email from NBC Sports executive producer Sam Flood, who highlighted the historic four-goal NHL debut of the Maple Leafs' 19-year-old rookie center, Auston Matthews, which had left the sports world slack-jawed. "We should do more," Flood wrote, indicating his network's desire to feature Matthews and Toronto.

"We're thinking the same thing," Bettman replied.

NBC Sports soon received permission to flex Toronto's home opener, an eventual 4–1 win over Boston, into its Saturday-night prime-time slot. Though such moves are more commonly reserved for spring's playoff push, Matthews's instant stardom was too juicy to ignore. "This is purely based on a player," Flood says. "There's no other reason we're doing this than Auston Matthews."

Such is the power of today's fledgling stars, not quite movers of mountains but certainly of needles and national broadcasts. Winnipeg right wing Patrik Laine, the second overall pick behind Matthews last June, also scored in his debut. Edmonton center Connor McDavid, who at 19 was recently made the youngest captain in league history, became the first teenager to open back-to-back seasons with three-point games. By the weekend 35 players unable to legally drink in the U.S. had appeared in the league.

"There's no doubt that teams are featuring that talent earlier," NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly says.

The paradox? Many of the league's most thrilling individual draws—Matthews, McDavid, Laine and Calgary's Johnny Gaudreau, to name several—rarely appear on national TV in the States. The recent struggles of Canada's seven clubs are partially to blame, because that has steadily sent high draft picks across the border. Plus, viewership in the Lower 48 simply doesn't justify regular appearances from the small-market teams up North; Toronto and Montreal remain the only Canadian teams scheduled to appear on NBC this season.

"We should do more," Flood wrote, indicating NBC's desire to feature Matthews and Toronto.



Still, the NHL could do well to take a cue from the O'Jays' "Give the People What They Want." Namely, the speedy, skilled superkids. Blending under-23 players from the U.S. and Canada for September's 2016 World Cup of Hockey was a decent start. High-flying Team North America became a fan favorite, and its early exit contributed to ratings drops during the elimination round.

Toronto-Boston shouldn't be an outlier. Matthews delivers the unique appeal of someone raised in the Sunbelt (Scottsdale, Ariz.) and playing for an Original Six franchise. McDavid's home run potential in the open ice belongs in prime time. So does the diminutive Gaudreau's creativity in close quarters and Laine's powerful shot, which has drawn comparisons to that of his childhood idol, Alex Ovechkin.

So as Washington's Ovechkin and Pittsburgh's Sidney Crosby did after the 2004–05 lockout, today's young stars should receive the spotlight. "Everyone can skate, everyone can play at the top speeds," says Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, McDavid's 23-year-old Oilers teammate. "The league's turning in that direction."

Just look at Matthews's second goal. He stick-handled the puck through the legs of two opponents, undressed the Senators' All-Star defenseman Erik Karlsson along the wall and beat goaltender Craig Anderson short side. It was a superhuman solo effort, which had Matthews trending on Twitter and NBC Sports rushing to squeeze the Leafs into prime time. As for future peeks at Matthews, though, Stateside fans might have to wait. "There's no need to get ahead of ourselves," Flood says. "If he scores four goals again, we'll jump on it." □



UNCLE, SAM

The Panthers and other foes have capitulated to a reborn Bradford.



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October 24, 2016 **NFL** Sports Illustrated

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• **CALL IT A** •

COME GIVE BACK DAGG

BY AUSTIN MURPHY

Photograph by
Perry Knotts/AP

Rising from the ashes, overcoming indignity
and injury, the members of the
ALL-LAZARUS TEAM are subjects of the most
compelling stories of 2016—and, in the case
of one resurrected quarterback, command a
surprising Super Bowl contender

“The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY, *A FAREWELL TO ARMS*

THE NFL doesn't really break *everyone*—surely there's been the odd kicking specialist who's made it through a career unscathed. The rest, however, this league does tend to fold, spindle and mutilate.

Let us lift our glasses high, then, to the Lazari—the plural of Lazarus—who have endured extraordinary despair and bounced back to reclaim, resuscitate and otherwise resurrect their careers. Overlooked and underappreciated, counted out and cut, they are survivors of the injury list and the waiver wire, possessed of equal measures talent and resilience. They are also, it turns out, more common than you might realize.

SAM BRADFORD was dapper in a muted blue suit with a tasteful windowpane pattern. As he sat beside his locker, an hour after leading the Vikings to their fourth straight victory, on Oct. 3 against the Giants, his rising trouser cuffs revealed a fashion faux pas: Beneath his stylish tan oxfords, he wore no socks.

Bradford explained, “It’s the one superstition I’ve kept for my whole career”—a span stretching back to Putnam City North High and through his prolific career at Oklahoma. As the first pick in the 2010 NFL draft, by the Rams, he set a league record for most completions by a first-year quarterback and was named Offensive Rookie of the Year. Tall and smart, with an accurate arm, able to throw with touch and power, the kid radiated success. He had a glow about him . . . until he didn’t.

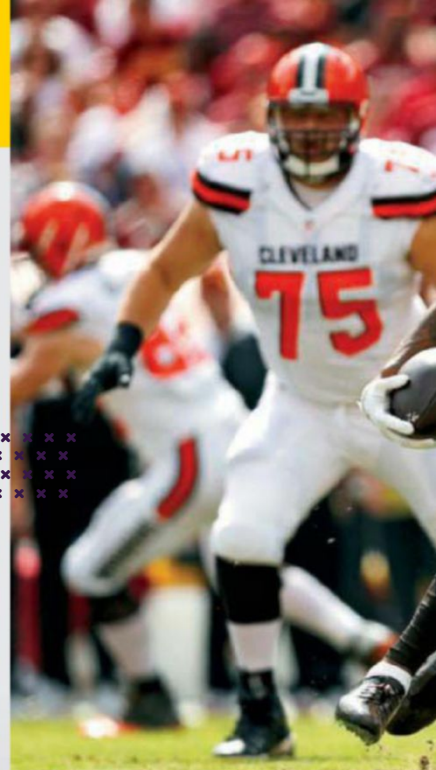
After a season-ending ACL tear in 2013 and another in ’14, his name became synonymous with *hard luck*. He was traded to Chip Kelly’s Eagles and finished last season strong—but it was time, once again, for the other shoe to drop. Kelly was fired; Philadelphia moved up in the draft to snag Carson Wentz at No. 2. That vote of no-confidence provoked a rare fit of pique in the usually even-keeled Bradford, who announced he wanted a trade.

Helping Bradford come to peace with being stuck in Philly, sharing the position with the team’s QB of the future, was his Christian faith in general and a passage from the Book of James in particular. “Hang on, I’ve got it right here,” Bradford says, pulling out his phone and reading: *Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds. Because*



PRYOR OFFENSE

Rejuvenated like Bradford (8), Pryor (11) has the potential to be a rare Browns Pro Bowler.



When Cortazzo put up viewers responded, “He’s

THERE’S NOT ONE PERSON

you know the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Perseverance, it turned out, had not finished its work. Neither had Eagles general manager Howie Roseman. Bradford had only been awake for a couple of minutes on the morning of Sept. 3 when he got a text from Philadelphia coach Doug Pederson: “We need to talk.”

“I figured he was calling to let me know they’d made a roster move,” Bradford says with a wry smile—“and sure enough, he was.” The Eagles had traded him to the Vikings (whose starter, Teddy Bridgewater, had torn his left ACL on Aug. 30) in exchange for two draft picks. That was at 8 a.m. Bradford and his wife, Emma, made it onto a 1:30 p.m. flight to Minneapolis. By 4 p.m., Bradford was at the Vikings’ Eden Prairie facility, learning his fourth offense in three years. The season opener was eight days away.

While Bradford was familiar with the concepts in the system of his latest offensive coordinator, Norv Turner, the verbiage was new. It helped that the trade reunited Bradford with Shaun Hill, his backup for a season in St. Louis. If you think of a new offense “as a foreign language,” says Hill, “we have that common language that we spoke” as Rams. “So we can kind of relate.”

The Turners—Norv and his son, Scott, the Vikings’ QBs coach—also “code-worded” some of the more unwieldy, lengthy play names on their call sheet so that “one word equals a whole play,” says Scott. The downside of that shortcut: Everyone has to learn the code. “It puts a little more stress on the other guys.” But everyone in the huddle seems happy to do his part.

What we are learning this season is that, while Bradford may have never quarterbacked a team to the playoffs (or, for that matter, a winning season), this may have had less to do with his abilities than his supporting casts in

BOB LEVITON/AP



videos of Pryor's workouts on social media, got no chance." Pryor told his trainer, "Man, IN THIS COUNTRY WHO THINKS I CAN DO THIS."

St. Louis and Philadelphia. He is No. 1 in completion percentage (70.4%) and No. 2 in passer rating (109.8), and he's one of just two qualifying QBs who haven't thrown an interception. Pro Football Focus rates him as the No. 3 passer in the league. And this has been without the injured Adrian Peterson. No passer gets less from his backs (2.5 yards per carry) than Bradford does.

With go-to receiver Stefon Diggs out of the lineup with a groin injury in Week 5 against Houston, the imperturbable Bradford repeatedly found Adam Thielen. The onetime D-II walk-on finished with seven catches for 127 yards and a touchdown in a 31-13 spanking of the Texans, which left Minnesota as the league's last unbeaten. Bradford has displayed a deep-ball accuracy that Bridgewater lacks, and he has, of late, defibrillated the career of kick returner/wideout/Lazarus Cordarrelle Patterson, a 2013 Pro Bowler.

Despite taking numerous hard shots in his four starts—the Vikings lost both tackles to seasonlong injuries—Bradford “gets up every time,” says left guard Alex Boone. “He’s one of the toughest mother-----s I’ve seen.”

He’s also “one of the most intelligent quarterbacks I’ve ever been around,” adds six-year veteran tight end Kyle Rudolph, still marveling at Bradford’s ability to lead the Vikings to a 17-14 win over the Packers after just two weeks with the team. Before he could locate his receivers in that game, Bradford first had to locate the team’s newly minted home, U.S. Bank Stadium. After eating his pregame meal with Hill in the team hotel, he had a question for his old friend. “Um, how do you get to the stadium?”

“Are you driving?” Hill asked him. Bradford was. “I’ll ride with you.”

With Bradford aboard, this team is poised for a long drive through the playoffs. Of course, not all comeback journeys point to the postseason—which isn’t to say they aren’t worth celebrating.

IT WAS June 2015, Tim Cortazzo recalls, a pleasant morning in western Pennsylvania. A former receiver at Toledo, the personal trainer was working with members of the Penn-Trafford High football team when a familiar, rangy figure approached the field.

“Terrelle Pryor walks over and says, ‘What’s up?’ and we start talking,” says Cortazzo. It had been eight years since Pryor’s last game at QB at nearby Jeanette High, where he was the 2007 *Parade* National Player of the Year. After three seasons at Ohio State and three with the Raiders, he’d been signed and cut by the Seahawks, Chiefs and Bengals. By the time Pryor walked onto the field at Penn-Trafford that day, he’d arrived at a momentous and difficult decision. “I think I’m gonna try and switch positions,” he told Cortazzo, who runs FSQ Sports Training in Trafford. “I know you played receiver. Can you help me out?”

He and Pryor did drills for 30 minutes or so, until Cortazzo had to stop. He had a class to teach. Before leaving, Pryor asked him, “What are you doing tomorrow?”

They got busy. Freakish athletic ability aside, the 6’4”, 223-pound Pryor was a project at his new position. “He was big, strong and fast,” says Cortazzo, but also “robotic” and “super raw.” He needed to work on everything: his hands, his releases, sinking his hips going into breaks, keeping his feet moving coming out of them. A week or two after starting with Cortazzo, Pryor signed with the Browns. “At that point, he became obsessed with [playing receiver] and started grinding.”

To buoy his business, Cortazzo would post occasional videos on social media, dispatches from Pryor’s quest. Not all the feedback was gracious. “I got comments like, ‘He’s got no chance,’” says Cortazzo. At one point a discouraged Pryor told his trainer, “Man, there’s not one person in this country who thinks I can do this.” Sharing that opinion, apparently, was then Browns GM Ray Farmer, who cut Pryor on Sept. 10—five days after he’d been informed he made the final roster. “I had some low moments,” Pryor says. “I don’t mean to sound arrogant, but there were [QBs] on the teams I’ve been released from who weren’t better than me. That’s when I realized: This is political; I just didn’t fit in with what [personnel people] were looking for in a QB. It was time to try something else.” Says Cortazzo, “He was back here training with us the day after he was cut.”

The Browns ultimately re-signed Pryor last December, but the fact that they drafted *four* receivers last spring suggests they weren’t exactly banking on him. Pryor used that as inspiration. He complemented his FSQ training with two weeks in Charlotte, where he worked with future Hall of Fame receiver Randy Moss. And in August, Pryor was the talk of Cleveland’s training camp.

Following his second score (a 75-yard bomb from Josh McCown) during Cleveland's intrasquad scrimmage at the Horseshoe in Columbus, the erstwhile Jeannette Jet turned to the cheering crowd and semaphored O-H-I-O.

The question, it turns out, is not whether Pryor can cut it as an NFL wideout. The question is, How soon will he make his first Pro Bowl? After logging three catches apiece in his first two games, Pryor hauled in eight balls for 144 yards in Week 3, against the Dolphins. That breakout as a receiver came on a day—irony alert—the Browns also called on him to play nine snaps at QB, where he went 3 of 5 for 35 yards rotating in with third-stringer Cody Kessler. Pryor also carried four times for 21 yards and a touchdown, and was, according to the graders at Pro Football Focus, the best Brown on the field.

Six weeks into what is shaping up to be another Stephen King kind of season in Cleveland, Pryor is the lone beam of sunlight. His team-leading 33 grabs for 413 yards and three TDs (and the fact that he's PFF's No. 9 pass catcher) are more impressive considering that more than half of those passes have come from the team's third- and fourth-string passers. Meanwhile, Pryor remains a de facto QB5; he took five snaps at the position in Week 5, rotating in with Charlie Whitehurst.

As the praise pours in, Pryor plugs his ears, repeating his mantra that he's just "scratched the surface" of his abilities, that he's not satisfied with eight catches for 144 yards—"I want 15 for 270. I want to break records." Then, following a forlorn pause, he adds, "I want to see the Browns win every game."

In reality, Cleveland will be fortunate to win even four games this season. Meanwhile, Pryor heeds the counsel of Moss, who weighs in weekly with advice on how to attack certain corners and who reminds him, "Tunnel vision." As long as Pryor continues to instruct scout team DBs to rough him up and catches upwards of 800 balls a week, results will come. As will a dramatic pay raise after the season when he becomes a free agent.

It's tough to begrudge a man his good fortune after he's worked so hard to prove so many people wrong.

1 **T SEEMS** fitting that in the months before Damon Harrison resurrected his football career, he worked the graveyard shift. During his first night restocking merchandise at a Walmart in Lake Charles, La., he was warned by his fellow workers: Don't sit on the floor if you're stocking the bottom shelves. "Of course, the first night I was there, I sat on the floor," says Harrison, now a 6' 4", 350-pound nosetackle for the Giants, "and I ended up falling asleep in the middle of the aisle."

Forgiven his rookie mistake, he went on to flourish at Walmart, and his managers eventually offered

him a full-time gig. If they'd called five minutes earlier, Harrison says, "I would've taken that job. That was gonna be some pretty good money." But he'd already spoken that morning to Steven Miller, the defensive line coach at William Penn, an NAIA school in Oskaloosa, Iowa. Miller had offered him a scholarship, and Harrison accepted. If Miller had called any later, the NFL would've been deprived of both an elite run stuffer and one of the more sublime nicknames in sports.

Damon (Snacks) Harrison and football did not get along at first. He was cut in middle school. *Twice*. When he went out for the freshman team at Lake Charles–Boston High, a coach asked him what position he played. The 6-foot, 200-pound newcomer explained that he liked to run the ball. So the coach put him at running back. "After that practice, man, I was hurting real, real bad," he recalls. "And then I had to walk home."

During that stroll he decided he was a basketball player. Harrison loved hoops and played four years in high school. "I don't want to brag on myself," he says, as a preamble to bragging on himself, "but I could shoot the rock, man."

When a torn left meniscus forced him to the sofa for a month during his junior season, Harrison put on "30 or 40 pounds," he says. Inspecting his new and more ursine physique, he decided to give football another go as a senior. In preseason workouts, coaches doubted he'd stick it out. "I don't know why you're coming out here," one goaded him. "You're not gonna be on this team." He made it as the backup right tackle. When the starter got hurt, Harrison took his job and never gave it back. He began playing on the D-line, too, and was named to the all–Southwest Louisiana team. Still, he generated not a scintilla of interest from any college. Two weeks before graduating, he sent a series of hard-sell emails to a dozen coaches. Because his family had no computer, he sent them from the school library.

Two coaches replied. One was Miller, then an assistant at Northwest Mississippi Community College. After taking a look at Harrison's film, Miller offered him a scholarship. But when Harrison arrived in Senatobia, Miss., the team waffled. Harrison had never spent time in a weight room, which quickly became obvious. "You had the linemen doing sets on the bench with 225 pounds. I was over with the quarterbacks, doing sets with 135. And I could only do that about five times."

The Rangers were only allowed eight out-of-state players and—*surprise!*—they were overbooked. Harrison would have to "grayshirt"—not play until the following season. Instead, he put Senatobia in his rearview mirror. Back in Lake Charles, he landed at Walmart and counted himself lucky. He would stock shelves in the pets section until 3 a.m., take his "lunch" break and decamp to cosmetics.

Then Miller was hired at William Penn, and he invited Harrison to join him. The coach even drove Harrison to Iowa in his Jeep Cherokee (though right up until the eve of that interminable journey, Harrison thought they were headed to Williamsburg, Va., home of the Col-



RICK WILSON/AP

lege of William & Mary). For four seasons, Harrison started every game at D-tackle for the Statesmen. As a senior, in 2012, he got a last-minute invite to a B-list all-star game in Arkansas and made a handful of tackles. A draft guru taking notes that day later wrote of him—Harrison can recite this passage from memory—“Too slow and heavy-legged to ever compete at the NFL level. At best a camp body.” Befitting an athlete whose lower body can now be fairly described as pachydermal, Harrison has the memory of an elephant.

On the third day of the draft, the day he was most likely to be selected, Harrison and some friends filled a booth at a Buffalo Wild Wings in Des Moines. Plenty of scouts and coaches had told him that they had their eye on him, but when the seventh round ended, his name hadn't been called. Sitting in the back of a van on the drive home, Harrison turned off his phone and shed what he describes—a bit angrily—as “angry tears. It had happened again. I was being told I was not good enough. *Again.*”

When he turned his phone back on, Harrison's agent told him he was going to the Jets as an undrafted free agent. To manage his expectations, he was warned that New York had just re-signed one nosetackle and had drafted another in 2011. He would probably be fighting for a spot on the practice squad.

“I hate it when someone tells me what I can and cannot do,” says Harrison, whose stout play in training camp forced the Jets to keep



Had his college coach called an hour later, Harrison would be working at Walmart today. “THAT WAS GONNA BE SOME PRETTY GOOD MONEY,” he says.

REBOUND FOR GLORY

Harrison (98) has snacked on the opposition; Pitta (88) just put his head down and rehabbed. Twice.

three nosetackles that fall. A year later he was starting. After last season, PFF rated him the NFL's second-best nosetackle and the single best defender against the run. Last March he signed a five-year, \$46.5 million deal (\$24 million guaranteed) with the Giants, whose defense has gone from allowing 4.4 yards per carry in 2015 (24th in the NFL) to 3.5 (sixth) in '16.

Had Miller not called in the nick of time, Harrison would have had to work 930 years at Walmart, making \$50,000 annually, to equal that contract. Even elephants don't live that long.

DENNIS PITTA *remembered*. He knew, as he was being carted off the field in Cleveland on Sept. 14, 2014, that he'd dislocated his right hip, just as he'd dislocated it 14 months earlier, in training camp. He knew team doctors would now attempt to pop the head of his femur back into its socket, as they had on the practice field in Owings Mills, Md. This time, he recalls, they waited until the medic cart was “just inside the tunnel,” so the crowd wouldn't see them manhandling the leg.

“I don't think I've experienced anything more painful,” says the seventh-year tight end. To hear him expound on hip anatomy, on his two surgeries and on the perils of avascular necrosis, which afflicted Bo Jackson but not Pitta, is to realize that his self-description as a “hip specialist” on his Twitter bio is not entirely in jest.

After he'd dislocated the same hip twice in just over a year, doctors told him he was done with football. Pitta agreed. Or at least he *pretended* to agree while he rehabbed from the second injury. “Based on what everybody was telling me,” he says, “I had very little hope of returning.”

You couldn't blame the Ravens for writing him off. Which they did. Baltimore drafted two tight ends in 2015, then added another, free agent Ben Watson, last March. Pitta, for all anyone knew, was rehabbing “to be able to run around and play with my kids and feel normal.”

Yet there he was on the practice field last October, catching passes from Joe Flacco. “I was running well and cutting well,” he recalls, “but I didn't quite feel 100%.” Pitta was shut down for the rest of the season.

And then there he was, reporting to training camp in July. And there he was on Sept. 18, back in Cleveland, 728 days after that cart ride. This time, after catching nine passes for 102 yards in a 25–20 Ravens win, he *walked* off the field. Four weeks later, his 34 catches are second most among NFL tight ends. He's on pace for 91 grabs, which would smash his career high of 61 in 2012.

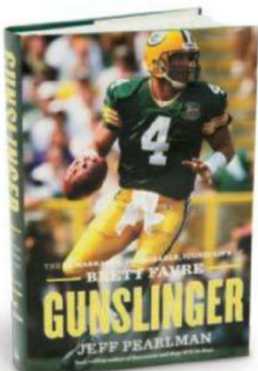
Like his fellow Lazari, Pitta had made it all the way back. Perseverance had finished its work. □





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Gunslinger: The Remarkable, Improbable, Iconic Life of Brett Favre by Jeff Pearlman. Copyright © 2016 by Jeff Pearlman. Used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. All rights reserved.



+ N F L

THE OFF SEASON

A footnote in a historic career, Brett Favre's rookie year in Atlanta was a strange, outrageous season with the NFL's most dysfunctional team

BY JEFF PEARLMAN

Photograph by
JIM GUND/Getty Images

TRADITIONALLY SPEAKING, the days that follow the draft serve as a period of mental adjustment. Young players come to grips with relocating to foreign cities, and organizations start the process of figuring out who fits where, and how. There are press conferences to attend and papers to sign and jerseys to hoist and pose behind. Although Falcons coach Jerry Glanville was far from enamored with the addition of a quarterback he didn't want in the spring of 1991, he had no choice in the matter. Brett Favre was coming to Atlanta.

Before bread could be broken, though, Bus Cook—Favre's naive agent—committed a classic rookie mistake. Having watched his client's heartbreak over being a second-

round pick, and also seeing Raghib Ismail, the presumptive first overall selection in the draft, take big money from the Canadian Football League, Cook reached out to the Toronto Argonauts and the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. Then he informed the media. "That Canada stuff, it's just us talking right now," Cook told *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on April 23. "Brett wants badly to play in Atlanta, but we have to explore all the options."

The resulting freeze between player and franchise involved Glanville uttering the phrase "F--- that kid" inside the Atlanta offices 2,762,211 times. At long last, on July 17, Favre and the Falcons agreed to a three-year, \$1.4 million deal that included a signing bonus somewhere between \$350,000 and \$400,000. Favre reported to Suwanee, Ga., the next day for the opening of training camp, commencing his one-year apprenticeship at the strangest and most dysfunctional shop in the National Football League.

Beginning with the Falcons' debut season in 1966, the team forged a reputation for spirited ineptitude. The franchise was owned by Rankin Smith, a former U.S. Army combat pilot who made his money in his family's life insurance business, and run by Taylor Smith, the fourth of

his five children. "In public they were called the Clampetts," says Terence Moore, a longtime sports columnist for the *Journal-Constitution*. "They were nice people who couldn't figure it out." Upon Favre's arrival Atlanta had but one double-digit-win season, but some around the league felt the team was turning a corner. The roster featured a slew of young, exciting players, including quarterback Chris Miller, receiver Andre Rison and a dynamic defensive back from Florida State named Deion Sanders. And while Atlanta finished 5–11 in 1990, fans seemed to believe in the vision of the coach. Glanville was loved by a few in the NFL and abhorred by the majority. Sometimes he told the truth. Oftentimes he stretched it. "You can listen to 100% of what Jerry said," says then team president Taylor Smith, "and believe 30% of it."

At his previous job, in Houston, Glanville dressed in all black, drove Harley-Davidsons, listened to rock 'n' roll and left tickets at the front gate for Elvis and James Dean. But by the time Houston lost to the Steelers in the first round of the 1989 playoffs, the Oilers' front office had tired of his antics.

The Falcons swooped Glanville up. In his introductory press conference, he was asked about the terms of his contract. He had no idea. The uniform and helmet colors went from primarily red to primarily black. He encouraged Rison and Sanders to dance. "He was the ultimate players' coach in many ways," says Ken Herock, then Atlanta's VP of player personnel. "He bulls---s with the players, he has fun with the players. But if he didn't like you, or he didn't want you around, it was a different thing entirely."

From the day he checked into camp, Favre was an object of Glanville's derision. Their opening exchange said it all.

Glanville: "Hey, Mississippi!"

Favre: "Hey, Coach, how are you doing?"

Glanville: "Call me Jerry."

Favre: "O.K. Hey, Jerry."

Glanville: "What school are you from, Mississippi?"

Favre: "Southern Miss."

Glanville: "Aw, damn, we drafted the wrong guy. We wanted the guy from Mississippi State."

"I was standing next to Brett," says George Koonce, a rookie free-agent linebacker, "and I remember the look on his face was devastation."

To Glanville, Favre projected an unjustified cockiness. The coach



"HE DIDN'T WANT TO PLAY," SAYS GLANVILLE

liked bravado, only not from rookies. There were other quarterbacks in camp—Miller, the established starter; Scott Campbell, a veteran backup; Gilbert Renfroe, a CFL refugee; Mike Rhodes, a former Arena League star—and Favre made it clear he thought he was the best of the bunch. "I'd played in six Pro Bowls by that point, and this kid comes up to me in camp and tells me he has the strongest arm in the NFL," says Chris Hinton, an offensive lineman. "I'm like, 'Yeah, whatever.'"

For the first two weeks of camp, Favre could not throw a spiral. He would drop back, release, and—*wobble, wobble*. A man known for his fastball was suddenly Phil Niekro. He chalked it up to nervousness. Then a lack of reps. When seven-on-seven drills commenced after a few days, June Jones, the Falcons' offensive coordinator, increased Favre's reps. He hoped more passes would equal more comfort. "Throwing a football's something I never had to think about," Favre said at the time. "But, man, there's some ugly ones, aren't there?"

Glanville ran the NFL's least-disciplined training camp, as well as the most colorful. No team featured more beer drinkers, more trash talkers, more larger-than-life personalities. Sanders, brash and outspoken, bought Favre his first dressy outfits, two garish suits straight out of Pimp 101. Rison purchased luxury cars as if he were buying cups of coffee.

There was also a dark side on the team. His name was Bill Fralic.

A 1985 first-round draft pick out of Pittsburgh, Fralic was a four-time Pro Bowler and one of the locker room's more sadistic ringleaders. If his No. 1 goal was to win games, it often felt as if a close second was teaming with his fellow offensive linemen to make life miserable for young Falcons. Sympathetic veterans warned rookies to steer clear, and with good reason. The linemen lived to humiliate.

Favre's draft class included a 10th-round pick named Pete Lucas. A 6' 3",

320-pound tackle, Lucas had graduated from high school and spent several years working at Swaggart Furniture, a Wisconsin-based family business. When his grandfather sold the company, Lucas enrolled at Wisconsin—Stevens Point and became a *Football Gazette* All-America. By the time he was picked by the Falcons, he was 25 and unusually mature for a rookie.

Fralic and several of his linemates made Lucas the target of their aggressions. "I was threatened to have my knees taken out in practice if I didn't do as I was told," Lucas says. "And that was basically to take my clothes off, sing, dance, perform—naked, any time, any place." (Fralic declined comment.)

One awful night Lucas and another rookie lineman, Mark Tucker, out of Southern Cal, were commanded to strip naked in front of the entire offensive line, hold each other tight and sing "Ebony and Ivory," the Stevie Wonder—Paul McCartney ode to racial unity. Lucas is white, Tucker African-American. "It was always the same thing: 'Do this or your knees are taken out,'" says Lucas. "I felt sexually violated and humiliated." Lucas's accounts are confirmed by other Falcons players. The Falcons eventually released Lucas, ending his NFL career before it ever began. "It was," he says, "the greatest relief of my life."

Not yet 22 and naive to the world, Favre was in no position to step in and help a battered teammate. Not that he would have. Much like when he arrived at

Southern Miss out of high school, the offensive linemen (and Fralic in particular) took a liking to Favre. He was one of them—a drinker, an airplane poker player. His shower routine involved bending over, naked, and pretending to chat with his butt crack. “It sounds gross,” said Scott Fulhage, the punter, “but it was hilarious.” As other rookies had their hair cut into mortifying clumps and unimaginable angles, Favre bribed his way out of the same fate. “He came and asked us whether he could avoid a Mohawk in exchange for a dinner for all the linemen,” says Hinton. “We went for it.” Favre took the entire unit to Bone’s, a steak house on Piedmont Road in Atlanta. It cost him a couple of thousand dollars, but his shaggy brown hair went untouched. “He ordered fish and drowned it in ketchup,” says Hinton.

Even though he didn’t want Favre, Glanville knew he had to keep him. After a couple of bad weeks of camp, the quarterback started to find his groove. Miller’s arm strength was terrific, but Favre’s throws were events. As was the case in college, his power

ILLE. “HE WANTED TO PARTY.”

left many a training camp wide receiver wounded.

Favre presumed he would wind up the No. 2 quarterback. Sure, he struggled to grasp Jones’s complex red-gun offense, but things were starting to make sense. The Falcons’ 1991 regular season was scheduled to open at Kansas City on Sept. 1, and Favre told family and friends that barring an alien invasion, he would be playing behind Miller.

On Aug. 28, the aliens invaded.

The headline on the Associated Press story read CHARGERS’ TOLLIVER TRADED TO FALCONS, but it could have been FALCONS’ FAVRE NOW FREE TO GET FAT AND DRUNK. A third-year quarterback out of Texas Tech, Billy Joe Tolliver had been nicknamed Billy Joe Terrible by the *Los Angeles Times*, and it was justified. He was just good enough to play and just bad enough to lose. Herock made the trade with San Diego with the understanding that Favre would remain the first backup. Then Herock read the depth chart for the second-week battle against Minnesota and saw that Glanville listed Tolliver as the top reserve. He barged into Glanville’s office. “I thought we agreed Brett was No. 2 and Billy Joe would be third,” Herock said. “That’s the reason I made the trade.”

Glanville didn’t like Herock and he didn’t like Favre. He also had final say on lineups. “Well, Billy Joe just knows so much more than Brett,” he crowed. “He’s more ready to play.”

At that moment, the Herock-Glanville relationship—never terrific to begin with—was permanently damaged. “I never really trusted him,” Herock says. “He lied a lot.”

When Favre learned of Tolliver’s acquisition, he was indifferent. Quarterbacks come, quarterbacks go. It was only after the Minnesota game—when Miller, Tolliver and Favre all suited up—that he realized his plight. Under a new NFL rule, a team could dress a third quarterback and still designate him as inactive and only available in case of injury to the starter and backup. Nobody bothered to fill Favre in. He learned that he had been deactivated only when *Journal-Constitution* beat writer Len

Pasquarelli approached him in the locker room to ask whether he was upset. “I was third?” Favre said. An awkward pause. “Oh, well. I’ll just keep plugging away, I guess.”

“It was the beginning of the end,” says Herock. “Brett lost interest.”

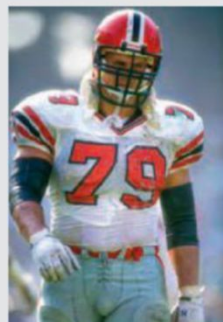
“I just said, ‘The hell with it,’” said Brett. “I went out every night, gained weight and was out of shape. I didn’t study, I didn’t care. I’d show up just in time for the meetings, and I’d be out of there the second the meetings were over.”

Glanville reached out to the Falcons’ favorite night spots. “I went to all of them and asked them not to give [Favre] free drinks, not to let him party, that he needed to be at home,” Glanville says. “Well, in Atlanta they don’t care who you are, what you want. No bar would agree to help me.

“People think I didn’t like Brett Favre. Not true. It wasn’t about like or hate. I saw him do things with a football nobody did. I’ve seen him, in the wind, throw strikes when nobody could get heat on the ball. He could play. But he didn’t want to play. He wanted to party.”

Favre’s regular-season debut came on Oct. 27, against the Rams at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium. Miller had left the game with a bruised right thigh, and Tolliver went 5 for 5 for 45 yards before a hip pointer forced him out too. With 1:54 remaining in the fourth quarter, his team up 31–14, Brett Favre walked onto the field under Glanville’s directive: “Don’t do anything stupid, Mississippi.” Favre successfully handed off three

times. “Hey, I came in and ran out the clock pretty good, didn’t I?” he joked afterward. “I think I found me a new role. I’ll be our kill-the-clock guy.”



THE CIRCUS

With Glanville (top) and Fralic, Atlanta was the NFL’s most colorful—and undisciplined—team.

A T ONE O’CLOCK on the afternoon of Nov. 10, 1991, two weeks after Favre executed those three marvelous handoffs, the Falcons and the Redskins faced off in Washington. At 9–0, the Redskins were an NFL powerhouse. At 5–4, the Falcons were on the rise and confident. With Miller out because of a rib injury, Tolliver started and completed 14 of 31 passes. By late in the fourth quarter the Redskins were up 49–17 and the 56,454 fans at RFK Stadium were filing out.

A few weeks earlier Glanville had said that for Favre to play, “We gotta have two plane wrecks and four quarterbacks go down.” This was neither an airline crash nor four battered quarterbacks, but Tolliver had been sacked five times. So, with nowhere else to turn, Glanville let Favre take over for the final 55 seconds. Wearing his black number 4 jersey over a white long-sleeve shirt (it was 35°), Favre took the snap and dropped nine steps back. With the pocket collapsing, the quarterback drew back his arm and shot a pass—high and hard but not completely uncatchable—toward wide receiver Mike Pritchard. The football slipped through the wide receiver’s hands and into the arms of linebacker Andre Collins, playing four yards back. He bobbled the ball, controlled it, and sprinted 15 yards for the score. Favre walked off the field. “Well, Brett Favre, you ever have the Redskins on your schedule at Southern Mississippi?” crowed Randy Cross, a former NFL star now working color commentary for CBS. “Welcome to RFK and the NFL!”

Favre wandered through his teammates, all silent and glancing awkwardly in other directions. He finally reached his head coach, who couldn’t stomach his team being crushed so badly. “Can you believe that, Coach?” the quarterback said. “My first pass in an NFL game went for a touchdown!”

“Yeah,” Glanville said. “But it was for them, not us.”

“Eh, that doesn’t matter,” Favre replied. “It’s still a touchdown pass. That’s what they’ll remember.”

Glanville cackled. Moments later Favre returned to the field for the final 47 seconds. On fourth down with eight seconds remaining, Favre escaped pressure, drifted to his left and lofted a 55-yard Hail Mary that was picked off by cornerback Sidney Johnson.

Brett Favre’s life as an Atlanta Falcons quarterback began.

Brett Favre’s life as an Atlanta Falcons quarterback ended.

He never again played for the franchise. Miller returned to health and carried Atlanta to a 10–6 record and a wild-card berth. Favre’s statistical

FAVRE KNEW HE WAS USELESS. HIS WAISTLINE CONTINUED TO EXPAND.

line was complete (0 for 4, two interceptions), but his antics were not. There were still six regular-season games left, and with Miller back, Favre knew he was useless. He arrived at meetings with alcohol on his breath, and on one occasion was sent home by the coaching staff. Usually he was late. Favre’s understanding of the playbook was at a kindergarten level; his waistline continued to expand. “He absolutely could not run a 40-yard dash,” says Glanville. “It was a joke.”

If there’s one moment that encapsulates Brett Favre’s Falcons existence, it is the annual official team photograph at the Suwanee training facility. On this day Favre was nowhere to be found. He skidded into the parking lot nearly an hour after the photo shoot ended, spotted Glanville’s van pulling out, caught his attention and explained he was stuck behind an awful traffic accident and then he got lost and . . . and . . . and—it was all garbage. Favre had been out partying late into the night, and failed to set



PICKED OFF

After Atlanta selected Favre (on phone) in the second round in 1991, he appeared in just two games, with no completions and two interceptions.

the alarm. “I was hung over,” he said. “I tell people I played for Atlanta, and if they get the team picture they say, ‘What a liar. You didn’t play for them.’” Favre was fined \$1,500.

For Glanville, it was the last of the last straws.

“I got trapped behind a car wreck,” Favre told the coach.

“You are a car wreck,” Glanville replied.

THE SEASON ended with a 24–7 playoff loss at Washington, and a couple of weeks later Ken Herock steeled himself for a conversation he did not wish to have.

Throughout the year Glanville’s weekly Favre reports broke his heart. They were usually entertaining, but always negative. “I’d be on the road three or four days a week during the season, scouting,” says Herock. “I’d come back Friday and it’d be, ‘You should see what your boy did this week. Oh, he was drunk at a meeting. Oh, that son of a bitch is 20 pounds overweight.’ They showed me one tape and they go, ‘Watch this! You’ve gotta watch what he did in practice! Watch this ball! We’ve never seen a ball curve before. This guy can’t play.’”

Glanville insisted he was O.K. with Favre as a person but couldn’t stomach his attitude and approach. The main Falcons’ rules involved punctuality and effort, and he adhered to neither.

So now, sitting across from one another, Herock listened again to the coach’s complaints, swallowed hard, and said, “I’ll see what we can get for him.”

When Glanville exited the room, Herock dialed a familiar number. Ron Wolf, his longtime friend, had recently left the Jets to take over as general manager in Green Bay.

The Packers needed a quarterback. □



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STILL A SERIES TO SAVOR

The 1991 Fall Classic remains the best in baseball history. Even if the ballparks in Atlanta and Minnesota that hosted the seven-act drama are no more, all those who watched it, played in it or wrote about it will remember it forever

BY STEVE RUSHIN





SEVENTH HEAVEN

Larkin's walk-off single in the 10th produced the only run of Game 7, sending the Homer-Hanky-waving fans at the Metrodome into a state of bliss.

Photograph by
Richard Mackson



TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ago the Twins and the Braves played a World Series so loud and so memorable that it continues to ring in the ears of all who attended it. “It doesn’t seem that long ago,” says Kent Hrbek, who played first base for Minnesota, “until you look at the video and see all the mullets.”

Back in 1991, Hrbek was telling the national press corps gathered in Minneapolis for Games 1 and 2 that his all-time best bowling score was 267. But six years ago, at his beloved West Side Lanes in St. Paul, he eclipsed that mark, rolling 11 consecutive strikes and requiring only one more for a perfect game. “When I threw that 12th ball, going for a 12th strike, I just about crapped my pants,” he says. “I was shaking so hard trying to get 300.” He left a single pin standing, for a 299. Or as his hunting buddy and former Twins teammate Tim Laudner calls it: “Room for improvement.”

The same cannot be said of the ’91 World Series. Twenty-five years ago I wrote in *SI* that it was “the greatest that was ever played,” and that honorific still applies. Three games went into extra innings and four ended in walk-offs, including Games 6 and 7 in Minnesota. Despite that drama, and despite the fact that his wife, Jeanie, was “a wreck”—nearly sick with anxiety, as even neutral spectators were—Hrbek never felt anything like the pressure he would later succumb to at West Side Lanes. “When I stepped into the batter’s box or was playing first base,” he says, “I always felt at peace.”

And so Hrbek was strangely relaxed as he took up his position in the eighth inning of Game 7 that Sunday night in October. The game was still scoreless, but only because Atlanta DH Lonnie Smith, running from first base on a double by Terry Pendleton, stopped for a long interval at second after falling for a decoy by Twins second baseman Chuck Knoblauch, who pretended to throw to shortstop Greg Gagne while the baseball was rattling around in leftfield.

As a result, Smith was only on third rather than safely home in the dugout; Pendleton stood catching his breath on second; and David Justice was on first after having been walked to load the bases and bring Sid Bream to the plate with one out.

When Bream promptly hit a grounder to the right side, Hrbek charged to field it cleanly, fired home to Twins catcher Brian Harper for the force-out of Smith, then raced back to the bag to take a return throw that beat Bream, thus giving the Twins an improbable, inning-ending, 3-2-3 double play. As Hrbek pumped his fist in celebration, the Metrodome seemed ready to collapse beneath a ceiling of sound.

1991 WORLD SERIES

The guy seated next to me in the press box turned to say something, but it was too hopelessly deafening, and so he left his mouth hanging open in cartoon disbelief. “The Twins getting out of that eighth inning is still the loudest sound I’ve ever heard anywhere,” recalls that man, my friend and then colleague on the SI baseball beat, Tim Kurkjian, who was writing a sidebar. “It was like being at a Springsteen concert, strapped to a speaker, while he’s playing ‘Thunder Road.’”

By that point in the Series, the participants knew they were travelers in some historic terra incognita. When Minnesota manager Tom Kelly had come to the mound in the eighth, one Twin later told Kurkjian that if the manager had tried to take the ball from starting pitcher Jack Morris, a terrible spectacle would have followed: that of the ace murdering the manager on live television. At the very least, Hrbek says, there would have been a delay while the grounds crew came out “to scrape pieces of TK off the mound.”

That national television audience, not incidentally, was 50.3 million. The viewership for the last World Series Game 7, in 2014, was less than half that. The Series’ greatest star—Twins centerfielder Kirby Puckett, who forced Game 7 by winning Game 6 almost single-handedly—has been dead for 10 years now. The two stadiums in which the Series was played no longer exist. And the franchises involved, for most of ’16, were the two worst teams in baseball. All of this was, in other words, a very long time ago. For me, newly turned 50 this fall, the 1991 World Series was exactly half a lifetime ago.

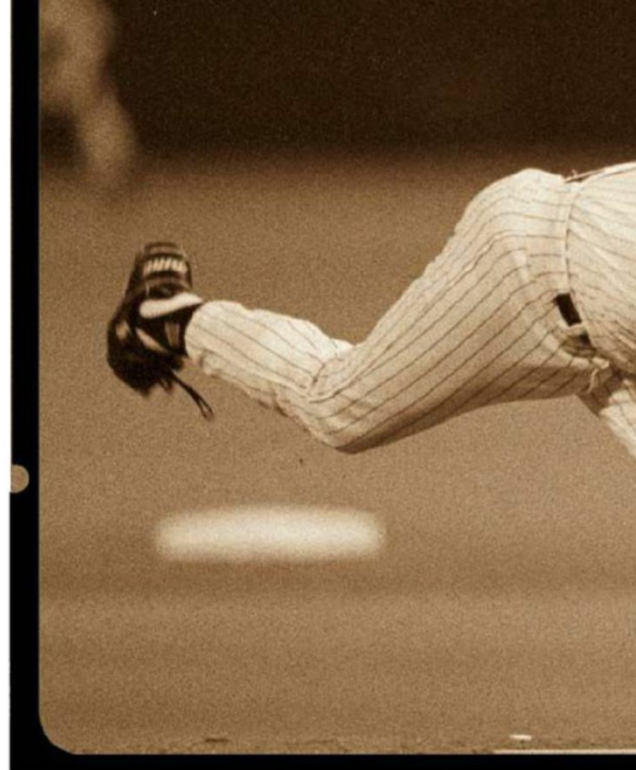
I had grown up in Hrbek’s hometown of Bloomington, Minn., and graduated from John F. Kennedy High in 1984, six years after he had. Throughout my childhood I watched Twins road games on a little TV in the basement and wrote accounts of them on my mom’s Royal typewriter. In ’84, when I was 17, my dad altered my birth certificate so that I appeared old enough to sell beer in a concession stand at the Metrodome, to which I would drive my mom’s Honda Accord every afternoon, parking it in the same lot on Portland Avenue. During games, in my orange visor and brown smock, I watched through a tunnel as rightfielder Tom Brunansky occasionally ran across the only patch of turf that I could see from my cash register.

Across the concourse from that concession stand was the Metrodome press box, and I spent games wondering how I could possibly get from here to there, a distance of 75 feet that may as well have been a million miles.

As a college student I was in a crowd shot on the front page of the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*’s preview of the 1987 World Series (which Minnesota would win in seven games over St. Louis), waving a Homer Hanky in the Dome’s leftfield bleachers. Four years later, in 1991, the Twins were in the World Series again, but this time, through a series of events too improbable to recount, I was covering the series for *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*.

“This is the time of your life,” Kelly said at the start of the Series, speaking for himself, but also, I felt, directly to me. “You should have fun.”

It should have been easy, given the thrilling spectacle that unfolded. But it was often agonizing to watch. As Game 7 built to its almost unbearable climax on that Sunday night, I was charged with typing 3,000 reasonably coherent words about the game and the Series overnight for



HOME SWEET DOME

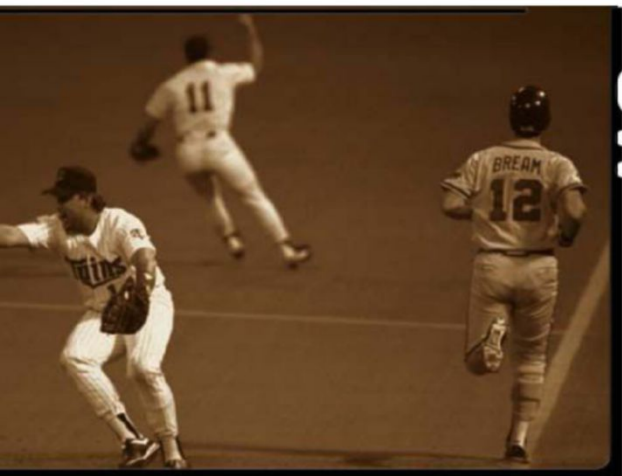
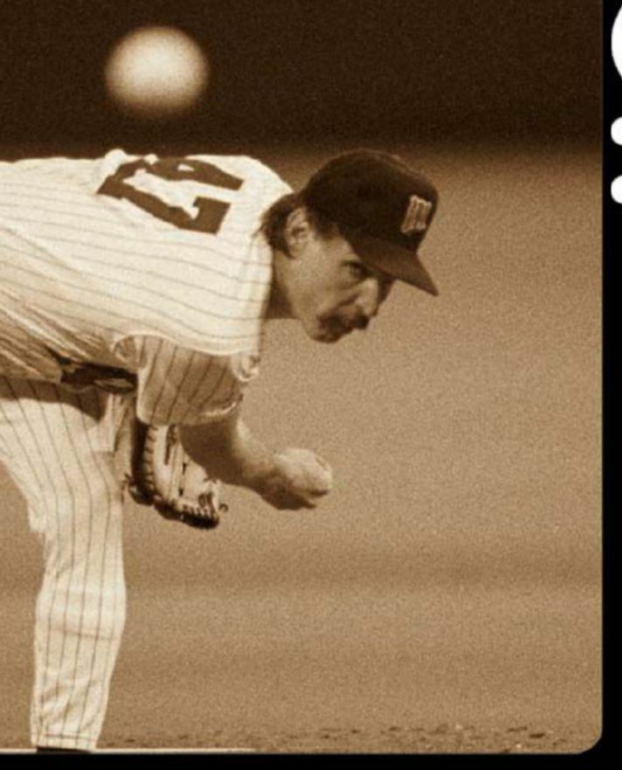
The Twins won all four times in Minneapolis, including Game 7, when Minnesota natives Morris, who pitched 10 shutout innings, and Hrbek, who started a key double play in the eighth to keep the game scoreless, played starring roles.

One Twin later said that had **Tom Kelly** persisted in his effort to take the ball from Morris in Game 7, a terrible spectacle would have followed: that of the ace murdering the manager on live television.

the magazine I grew up reading, about the team I grew up following, in the stadium where I worked and daydreamed as a kid.

When the Twins survived that eighth inning, and the Metrodome was swallowed by that tsunami of sound and Kurkjian let his mouth fall open, I inclined my ear to him. When the sound finally ebbed sufficiently, he said, “I can’t write tonight. I’m not worthy. The noise, the pressure, Jack Morris, Game 7? I’m just not worthy.”

A GAIN, IT was a long time ago. Kurkjian, who served as my unofficial mentor, proudly carried *The Baseball Encyclopedia* with him on the road in a handled suitcase. The book alone, he told me—after dropping it like an anvil on his bathroom scale—weighed 8.8



pounds. At the Atlanta airport, as we schlepped our bags to the taxi stand before Games 3, 4 and 5, Tim surveyed with disdain the pilots and flight attendants wheeling the roll-aboard overnight bags that were suddenly in vogue.

"If you ever see me pulling my suitcase through the airport like a toy choo-choo train, please kill me," he said. I promised that I would.

"I had a horrible three days in Atlanta," Hrbek says, "with the death threats from the Gant play." In Game 2 at the Dome, Braves centerfielder Ron Gant had rounded first when pitcher Kevin Tapani fielded an overthrown relay and fired it to Hrbek. Gant scrambled back and stepped on the base with his left foot, but his momentum carried that foot off the base, and he had to quickly put his right foot down on the bag instead. As he did so, Hrbek applied

the tag to Gant's right leg while appearing to lift that leg off the base. It was this frozen tableau that umpire Drew Coble surveyed when calling Gant out. In Georgia, Hrbek didn't leave his hotel, except to play three ballgames at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, all of which the Braves won.

And so the Twins returned home for Game 6 trailing 3-2. Puckett told his teammates he would carry them to victory and then did exactly that. He tripled in the first inning, scaled the wall to rob Gant in the third inning, gave the Twins a short-lived lead with a sac fly in the fifth and in the 11th inning hit a walk-off home run for a 4-3 win. The ensuing animal noise of the crowd in the Metrodome was, to that point, the loudest I had ever endured.

In those days there were push-button landlines at the press tables. As Puckett made his screaming lap of the bases, the gentleman seated in front of me—a veteran beat writer from a major newspaper—banged his fist on the phone in front of him: The handset jumped, and the bell made a single Pavlovian ding, like the one on the carriage return of my mom's Royal typewriter. That writer had a flight home on Sunday morning, until his plans (and his game story) were suddenly ruined by greatness.

In my own handwriting, in a notebook I've kept all these years, are the words Puckett said afterward, when asked if he had the energy to play a Game 7: "I'll get my rest when I'm dead."

And now he is, of a stroke in 2006, though outside Gate 34 at Target Field in Minneapolis, Puckett is forever rounding second base after that walk-off, throwing a roundhouse right fist into the air. If you press your ear to the bronze, you can hear the echo of its origin, the way you hear the ocean in a seashell, so that Jack Buck (also departed) is forever saying what he said on CBS when the ball landed in the leftfield stands: "We'll see you tomorrow night!"

Afterward, Morris calmly signaled that he would not shrink from the challenge that lay 20 hours ahead. "In the words of the late, great, Marvin Gaye," he said, 'Let's get it on.' Someone asked Hrbek later what he had done before Game 7 that Sunday. He squinted at the questioner as if the guy was nuts. "I watched football," he said, "like any normal American."

Kelly told his team not to get too jacked. This would not be a problem for Hrbek. On the morning of Game 7 in the 1987 Series, also in Minnesota, a friend had called him at 4:30 a.m. to say the ducks were in flight, so Hrbek joined him to hunt waterfowl. "But not this time," Hrbek says now. "Nobody called me."

You know what happened next. Morris pitched 10 innings of shutout baseball against the future Hall of Famer John Smoltz, who was his equal for 7 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings. Dan Gladden led off the bottom of the 10th with



SI.COM

For complete coverage of this year's postseason and to read Steve Rushin's original story on the 1991 World Series go to SI.com/mlb

1991 WORLD SERIES

a double, Knoblauch bunted him to third and Puckett and Hrbek were intentionally walked. That brought up pinch hitter Gene Larkin, whose deep drive to left-centerfield over the drawn-in outfield brought home Gladden, his glorious mullet flapping behind him the whole way.

Gladden and Larkin stayed in Minnesota after their careers ended. I once mentioned Larkin's hit, both timely and timeless, to students at a Catholic K-through-eight school in suburban Minneapolis. In the audience everyone pointed to a girl who confessed, with some embarrassment, "He's my dad."

Minnesota native Morris does Twins radio, as does Gladden. Hrbek has remained in Bloomington. "They can't kick me out of here," he says of our hometown, an idyllic place to grow up that every resident will happily acknowledge is and will always be the People's Republic of Hrbekistan.

To the gratitude of baseball fans everywhere, I never did kill Tim Kurkjian, and he has become a much-loved broadcaster on ESPN's *Baseball Tonight* and *Sunday Night Baseball*, for which he travels the nation, pulling a wheeled suitcase behind him like a choo-choo on a string, a practice he began in 1992, a mere year after vowing never to do so.

As for Hrbek, 56, he is likewise not immune to age. Three years ago he wrecked his left knee while bowling. It had to be replaced, ending his career, so that 299 will remain his best score, preserved for posterity like the statue of himself outside Gate 14 at Target Field. There are other monuments to the slugger. Hrbek's Pub, behind home plate at Target Field, is home to the man in food form: a Bloody Mary garnished with a chicken wing and a bacon burger. And five years ago, for the 20th anniversary of the 1991 World Series, the Twins gave out bobbleheads of Hrbek holding Gant by one leg.

So 1991 is at once omnipresent and long gone. West Side Lanes is closed, the Metrodome deflated. In its place is U.S. Bank Stadium, new home of the ascendant Vikings. Hrbek attended their first game there this season and found no trace that baseball was ever played on that spot, which is a pity. "I still hear about '87 or '91 every day that I'm out and about," he says. Watching fans on TV celebrate outside the Metrodome in '87, Hrbek told Gladden in the clubhouse,

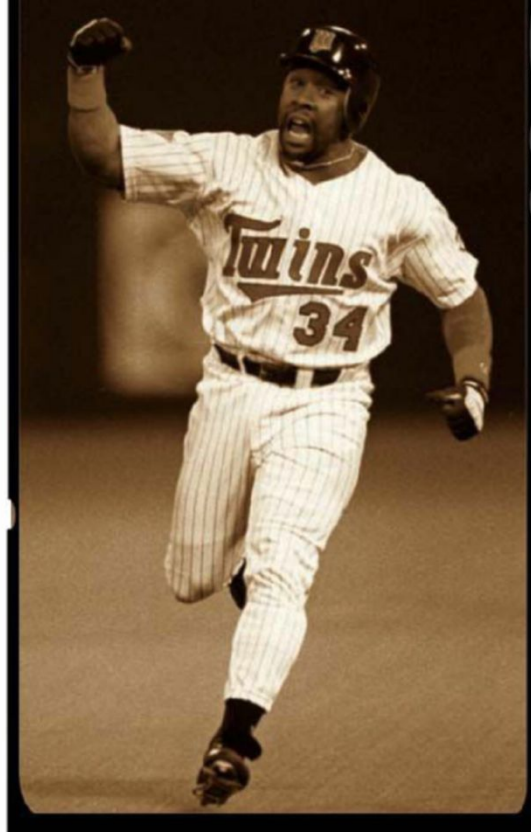


FOLLOW THE LEADER

Puckett promised to come up big in Game 6 and he did, with a spectacular catch and three hits, capped by an 11th-inning home run that sent the Series to Game 7.



For the 20th anniversary of the Series, the Twins gave out bobbleheads of **Hrbek** holding Gant by one leg.



"Let's go out there and celebrate with the people." "Are you kidding?" Gladden replied. "They'll tear us apart." So they stayed indoors.

FOUR YEARS later the 1991 celebration was still raging when I left the Metrodome after Game 7, and walked to the parking lot on Portland Avenue where I used to park my mom's Honda. Reeking of second-hand champagne, I drove my rental car to Bloomington, to the house I grew up in, to the basement where I used to write Twins stories. There I wrote another Twins game story, this one for SI. My mom had died a month earlier, after a short illness, and at 3 a.m., staring at a keyboard, I wondered what she'd have thought of this scene, 20 years after she first pressed a library card into my hand and urged me to treat it as a spendthrift would treat a charge card.

The story I filed a few hours later was fine—though I failed to mention Smith's baserunning error—and Kurkjian's companion piece was (despite his fears) more than worthy of the occasion.

Having arrived at the World Series from the same place, but by different means, Hrbek and I both wound up in the Kennedy High Athletics Hall of Fame: one of us for hitting home runs, the other for typing. But I'll take it. "I think it's pretty awesome to see someone type," he says sincerely. "I can't do it. I didn't take that class in 10th grade."

Instead, he fishes, hunts and accepts the daily goodwill of strangers. He also travels, within reason. "It's safe to say I don't go to Atlanta a lot," he says. "My face is still on wanted posters there." □



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SYM-1127



Branch Offices

Briles has done what he can to keep his offense under wraps, but his coaching tree is taking root.

**AS FORMER
BAYLOR COACH
ART BRILES
IDLES IN COLLEGE
FOOTBALL'S
BACKGROUND, HIS
HYPER-SPEED,
HIGH-SCORING
OFFENSE IS
GRABBING THE
SPOTLIGHT AND
RACING ACROSS
THE GAME—
SECRETS IN TOW**

BY PETE THAMEL

Briles photograph by
Tom Pennington/
Getty Images

→ **ART BRILES**, the 60-year-old architect of an improbable football rise at Baylor, has spent the 2016 season in exile. Baylor relieved Briles of his coaching duties on May 26 after Pepper Hamilton, a law firm hired by the school to investigate the program, found that “Baylor failed to take appropriate action to respond to reports of sexual assault and dating violence reportedly committed by football players. The choices made by football staff and athletics leadership, in some instances, posed a risk to campus safety and the integrity of the university.” (Athletic director Ian McCaw was put on probation and later resigned, and university president Ken Starr was demoted to chancellor and also later resigned.)

While Briles has been removed from the scene, the instrument of his success, the Baylor offense, is more visible than ever. The system he devised as a coach at Stephenville (Texas) High and at the University of Houston calls for splitting the receivers as wide as possible and running at hyper-tempo, a devastating combination of spread and speed that leaves defenses and fans gasping. In each of Briles’s last five years at Baylor, the Bears finished in the top five in the country in scoring. They won two Big 12 titles and emerged as a national title contender at a place that had long been a football backwater. “It’s literally unstoppable if you have the right pieces,” says Bowling Green coach Mike Jinks, who faced the offense as an assistant at Texas Tech.

Yet for all the yards gained and points scored, the Baylor system had not spread far beyond Waco. That was intentional. Briles had made secrecy a priority. There’s no written playbook:

The System Is the Star

THE BAYLOR OFFENSE

Players learn from video and during practice. Briles won't talk publicly about the offense's intricacies, and unlike most of his peers, he rarely appears at off-season coaching clinics. Cincinnati coach Tommy Tuberville calls the system "very, very simple," but even in a copycat business, few have been able to mimic Briles's success.

This season, though, the offense has gone national. Baylor, Syracuse, Texas and Tulsa each have a Briles disciple running the scheme. And like Briles, each of those coaches is dedicated to keeping the finer points under wraps. "I mean there's some things you just don't share," says Texas offensive coordinator Sterlin Gilbert, who learned the offense as a graduate assistant at Houston in 2005. "Go to Coca-Cola and try to get that recipe," he says. "There's some things in life that have success, and the reason it has been successful and stays that way is because minimal information has been given out about it."

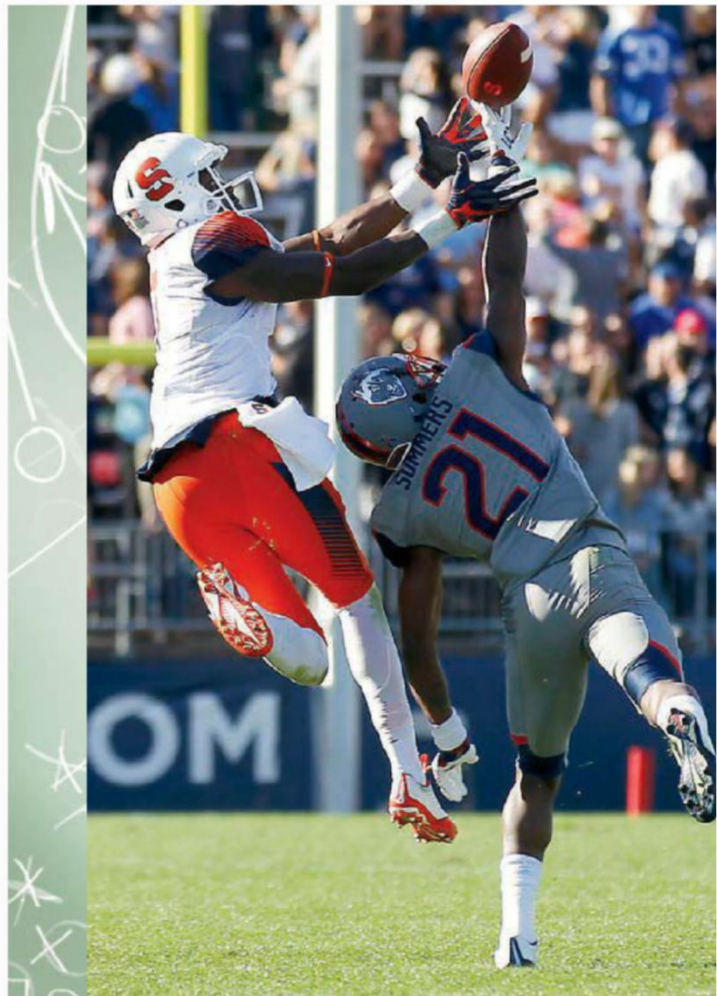
True, but if the stats and wins continue to mount, there will be more efforts to unravel the secret.

IT'S A muggy August morning as Syracuse coach Dino Babers stands before his team in its practice bubble. Rapper Meek Mill provides the sound track for the synchronized symphony of a 90-minute session that feels like one long wind sprint. There's no wasted motion and no players standing around, and the first break comes about two-thirds of the way through.

"The pace you are operating at," Babers tells the team, "you're never going to feel that pace in a game. O.K.? There's no team faster than us."

Babers, 55, is in his first season at Syracuse after two years as coach at Eastern Illinois (19–7) and another two at Bowling Green (18–9). Those jobs followed four years as an offensive assistant at Baylor. The Orange went 4–8 last year, running an option-based offense that was one

"THERE'S NO TEAM FASTER THAN US," BABERS TELLS THE ORANGE, INCLUDING ETTA-TAWO, THE COUNTRY'S SECOND-LEADING RECEIVER.



Speed Demons



Dino Babers

Syracuse coach

Plays per game: 88.3 (3rd nationally)
Points per game: 25.3
Rushing yards per game: 138.5
Passing yards per game: 331.0 (13th)



Kendal Briles

Baylor offensive coordinator

Plays per game: 86.2 (4th)
Points per game: 41.4 (11th)
Rushing yards per game: 284.4 (5th)
Passing yards per game: 275.0



Sterlin Gilbert

Texas offensive coordinator

Plays per game: 84.8 (6th)
Points per game: 38.7 (19th)
Rushing yards per game: 239.2 (17th)
Passing yards per game: 261.0



Philip Montgomery

Tulsa coach

Plays per game: 91.2 (1st)
Points per game: 34.0
Rushing yards per game: 223.8 (24th)
Passing yards per game: 243.8

STEW MILNE/AP (ETTA-TAWO); ELISA/GETTY IMAGES (BABERS); TOM PENNINGTON/GETTY IMAGES (BRILES); JOHN RIVERA/ICON SPORTSMEDIA/AP (GILBERT); ALONZO ADAMS/AP (MONTGOMERY)

Surprise, Surprise

THE FIRST HALF OF THE 2016 SEASON HAS
BEEN CHOCK-FULL OF THE UNEXPECTED

By Andy Staples



When we ranked **Washington** No. 7 in the preseason, we worried we'd fallen into the trendy-team trap. We might have had the Huskies too low. Sophomore quarterback Jake Browning (*below*) has completed 72.2% of his passes, and Washington's defense has averaged four sacks a game. The Huskies look like a playoff team.

Last Friday, Duke slowed **Louisville** sophomore quarterback Lamar Jackson in a 24-14 Cardinals win, but Jackson is still on pace to account for 60 combined rushing and passing touchdowns in regular-season play. Marcus Mariota accounted for 57 TDs in 15 games in his Heisman Trophy season in 2014.

Alabama's true freshman quarterback, Jalen Hurts, has helped make the top-ranked Tide—who can spread it out or bunch up and ram the ball down a defense's throat—the nation's most versatile offense.

Ohio State replaced 16 starters from a 12-1 team and might have gotten better. After a 30-23 overtime win last Saturday, in what may be the first of two meetings with Wisconsin, the Buckeyes are 6-0 and on a collision course with undefeated **Michigan**.

After being limited by injuries, neither **LSU's** Leonard Fournette (ankle) nor **Stanford's** Christian McCaffrey (lower body) is in the nation's top 10 in rushing yardage.

That **LSU** fired coach Les Miles wasn't surprising, considering that Miles ignored a direct order to evolve the offense. That Miles was fired in late September was shocking.

The **Big 12** remains college football's least predictable league. Preseason favorite **Oklahoma** is 3-0 in Big 12 play but 1-2 outside the league. The conference's best hope to make the playoff could rest with **West Virginia**, which moved to 5-0 on Saturday after a 48-17 win at Texas Tech.

of the country's most stagnant—99th in yards per play (4.9), 118th in yards per game (310.5) and 127th in plays per game (63.0). Babers has blown that up.

In its place he has instilled a culture of absolutes and efficiency. Staff and players are not allowed to use the phrase “pretty good.” Something is either good or bad. Babers lives 2.6 miles and two traffic lights from his office, which means he can get to his desk in less than five minutes. He politely declines to dive into specifics of the offense, deflecting questions with a big smile and a joke. And he tells an in-house crew filming promotional videos, “Make sure I see what goes on before you show that. No one else in the country does that drill.”

The players speed through reps—the system is based on repetition—and strength coach Sean Edinger later points out that an hour-and-a-half practice will include 155 plays. “In a lot of places, that’s a little more than two games’ worth,” he says. “[Other teams] just don’t do that.”

Well, most other teams. Two years ago Tulsa went 2-10 and finished 89th nationally in scoring. Then Philip Montgomery, 44, left his job as Baylor’s offensive coordinator to take over. In Montgomery’s first season the Golden Hurricane improved their point total by 12.5 per game, finished 18th in scoring and reached the Independence Bowl. “In the past at Tulsa, we had a package where we did some spread stuff and went fast,” says senior quarterback Dane Evans. “Now it’s our whole offense. We run our two-minute offense for two hours a day.”

When Evans hears heavy panting across the line, he knows he’s got the defense where he wants them. “I don’t want to say it’s physically impossible to go hard every play,” he says of opponents, but “it’s really about getting people tired and going after them.”

Montgomery is bothered by those who deride the system as simple. He says it’s streamlined by design and laughs at NFL teams that have play calls that take four sentences. “And that’s to run a damn counter,” he says. He points to one of the Baylor offense’s guiding principles: “Don’t make something easy hard.”

IN 2014 quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo went from Eastern Illinois—under Babers—to the NFL, a second-round pick of the Patriots. As a senior, Garoppolo threw for 5,050 yards and 53 touchdowns and completed 66% of his passes while leading the Panthers to a 12-2 record and the quarterfinals of the FCS playoff. Did Garoppolo make the offense or the offense make Garoppolo? “The offense forced everyone to look at him,” Babers says. “Then looking at him, there was no doubt what he could become. We both needed each other. But if you’re asking who got the most out of it, I think he got the most out of it.”



Leading Men

THE BEST PLAYERS YOU'RE NOT HEARING ABOUT

By Gabriel Baumgaertner
and Colin Becht



PLAYERS in the Baylor offense aren't the only ones putting up eye-popping numbers.

Texas Tech quarterback Patrick Mahomes and San Diego State running back Donnel Pumphrey are quietly leading the nation at their respective positions.

Through six games Mahomes, a junior, has completed 71.3% of his passes (second in the nation) for 2,579 yards (first) and 21 touchdowns (fifth). That puts him a few steps behind pace to break the FBS record for yards (5,833) and passing touchdowns (58), but when his rushing totals, 152 yards and seven touchdowns, are added, Mahomes could produce one of the gaudiest statistical seasons in college football history.

Mahomes (*below, in blue*) is more than just a product of his Air Raid scheme. A 2014 draft pick of the Detroit Tigers, he gave up baseball in the spring to focus on the gridiron. Now, the 6' 3" 230-pounder ranks third in Pro Football Focus's quarterback grades, behind only Louisville's Lamar Jackson and Clemson's Deshaun Watson. "I really don't know how you stop him," Louisiana Tech coach Skip Holtz said before Mahomes put up 507 yards of offense and six touchdowns on his Bulldogs. "Well, nobody else does either."

Meanwhile, Pumphrey (19) leads the nation in rushing yards with 1,111—or 185.2 per game—thanks to a blend of spectacular vision, speed and agility. Although the senior is only 5' 9" and 180 pounds, he's durable, ranking seventh nationally in carries (167) while going for 6.7 yards per run, eighth best among those with at least 100 rushes. He has started every game since the beginning of his sophomore season, which he finished with 1,876 yards rushing, third in the nation; his 1,653 yards last year were seventh best in the U.S. "He reminds me of Reggie Bush," South Alabama coach Joey Jones said before Pumphrey steamrolled the Jaguars for 151 yards and one touchdown. "He takes one step and he changes direction really quick, and he's got the speed to take it home."

If Mahomes and Pumphrey keep it up, each may earn a trip to New York City in December.

□



In each of Babers's first two stops his teams showed marked improvement in the second year, going a combined 22–5. In year two at Bowling Green the Falcons blew out Maryland at Byrd Stadium, 48–27; won at Purdue 35–28; and blasted Northern Illinois 34–14 to win the MAC title. This year the Syracuse offense is averaging 159.0 more yards per game and an astonishing 25.2 more plays per game, moving to No. 3 nationally from second to last. They have already tied or broken 11 school records, and Amba Etta-Tawo, a graduate transfer from Maryland, is second in the nation in receiving. He's already almost tripled his number of catches (to 56 from 20) and quadrupled his receiving yards (930 from 216) from 2015.

The system has given the program a vision and an identity, something it has lacked since the Donovan McNabb era of the late 1990s. It has also helped recruiting. Four-star 2017 quarterback Tommy DeVito, from Don Bosco Prep in Ramsey, N.J., is considered the best quarterback prospect the Orange have landed in years.

The same is true of Texas, which floundered offensively during coach Charlie Strong's first two years. That's why last winter Strong, athletic director Mike Perrin and university president Greg Fenves made a road trip to recruit

***"THERE'S SOME THINGS YOU JUST
DON'T SHARE," GILBERT SAYS. "GO TO
COCA-COLA AND TRY TO GET THAT RECIPE."***

Gilbert, 38, who as recently as 2011 was coaching high school ball outside Waco. He learned the Baylor offense as a graduate assistant at Houston in 2005 and, after his high school stint, worked for Babers at Eastern Illinois and Bowling Green before spending 2015 as Montgomery's offensive coordinator at Tulsa. Now in Austin, he has the Longhorns scoring 38.7 points per game, up from 26.4, and they have an identity that has resonated with recruits and fans.

This is not to say that all is perfect among teams running the Baylor system. Syracuse (3–4, after upsetting No. 17 Virginia Tech) and Texas (3–3) have struggled on defense. The Orange are allowing 37.7 points per game, while the Longhorns are giving up 34.0.

One of the offense's weaknesses is the pressure it puts on its own defense because of the large number of possessions it forces. But Babers is not going to slow anything down. He wants to highlight the offense. "We have to be able to show our product," Babers says. "Show our brand."

The Toughest Road



TEAM	OPP. RECORD	BIG GAME
1. Alabama	22-9 (.710)	Texas A&M
2. Ohio State	25-11 (.694)	Michigan
3. Michigan	22-15 (.595)	@Ohio State
4. Clemson	20-14 (.588)	@Fla. State
5. Washington	24-15 (.615)	@Utah
6. Texas A&M	21-16 (.568)	@Alabama
7. Louisville	23-15 (.605)	@Houston
8. Nebraska	26-11 (.703)	@Ohio State
9. Baylor	22-13 (.629)	@Oklahoma
10. Wisconsin	23-14 (.622)	Nebraska



Of course year one was always going to be about building a foundation, but will Syracuse be able to flip the switch in year two? Says Edinger, "It has never not worked."

GILBERT, FOR one, hopes that remains true. With his West Texas twang and penchant for trucker caps and Cowboy boots, he's at home in Austin, but the losses have brought calls for Strong's head. If Gilbert wants to help his boss make the case that the offense can eventually carry the team, he doesn't need to look far for hope.

Tulsa is 4-2, its only losses a 48-3 drubbing by No. 2 Ohio State and a narrow loss to No. 11 Houston, 38-31, both on the road, while back at the mother ship—Baylor—Briles's offense continues to thrive without Briles. Or at least without Art Briles. The Bears, down to 72 players after defections, dismissals, transfers and injuries, are 6-0, ranked ninth and averaging 41.4 points. They're led by a 33-year-old offensive coordinator who ran the Baylor offense as a quarterback at Stephenville and at Houston. Kendal Briles is proving that both he and the offense can flourish without his dad around.

Of course, he may not be the only Briles coaching for long. One of the most intriguing dramas of the final weeks of the season will be whether Briles will return to the sidelines in 2017. LSU has dismissed its coach, and other top-tier programs are bound to follow suit. Only one can land Houston's Tom Herman, this season's most coveted candidate. Will some athletic director decide that Briles's record of success is worth the inevitable backlash that would come with hiring him?

The coming months will tell. □

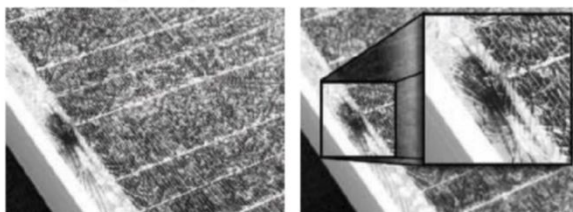
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Who's Included? The Settlement includes anyone in the United States who: (1) purchased certain BP solar panels for installation on a property, or (2) currently owns a property on which these panels are installed and, in either case, who still owns some or all of the BP solar panels.

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What does the Settlement provide? Subject to Court approval, a \$45.33 million fund will be created to pay for the removal and replacement of a subset of Class Panels (Category 1), and to pay administration, attorneys' fees and costs, and Class Representative awards. A separate \$20 million fund will be established for the remaining Class Panels (Category 2), which have a lower failure rate. Category 2 claimants will be entitled to a free visual inspection to identify any failed panels, replacement of failed panels, replacement of all panels if over 20% of panels have failed and, if not all panels are replaced, a free inverter with arc fault detection. Non-residential class members with 400 or more Class Panels will be invited to commercial negotiations. Complete details are found on the website.

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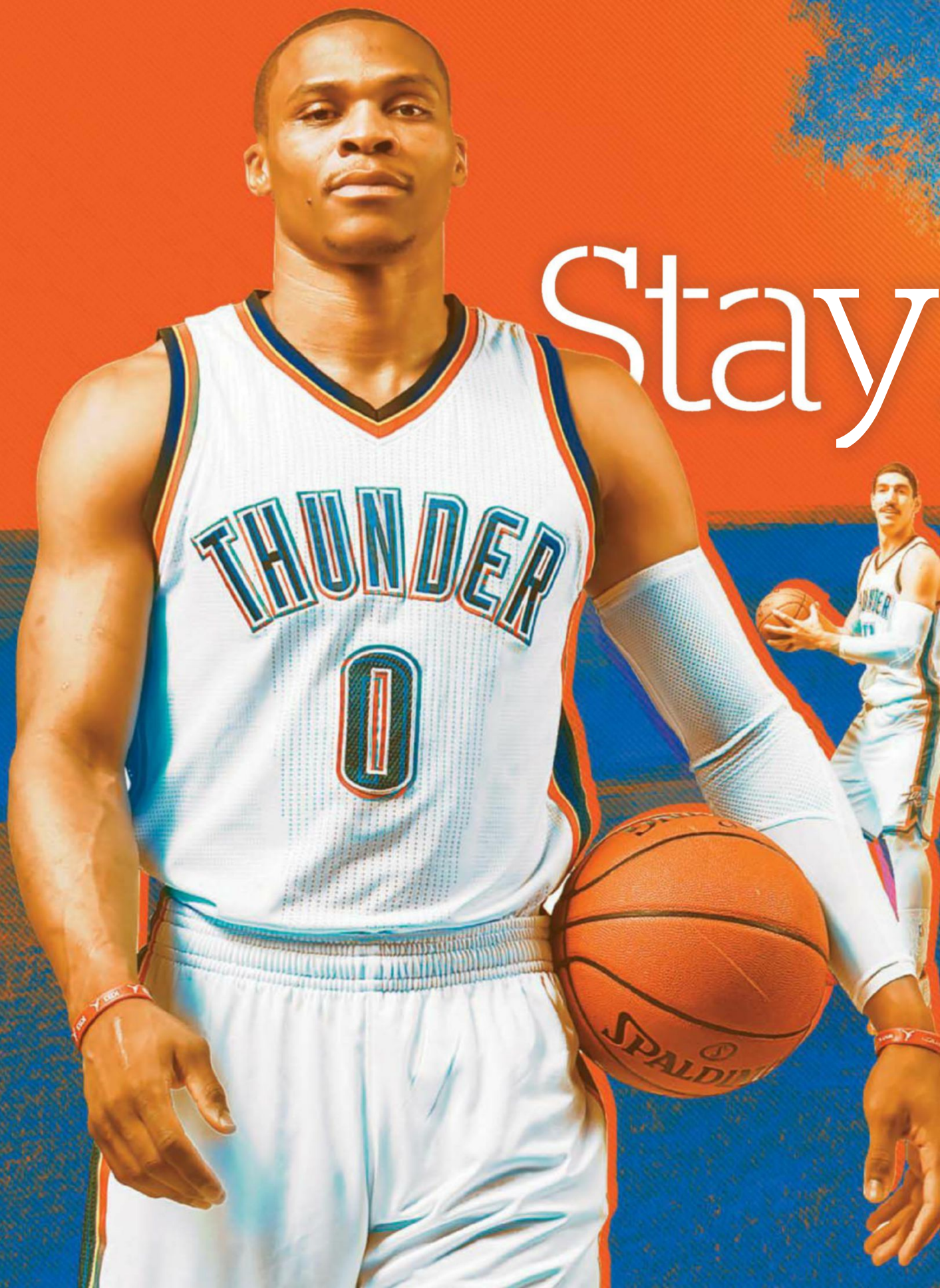
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The Court will hold a hearing on **December 22, 2016 at 3:00 p.m. PST** to consider whether to approve the Settlement and a request for attorneys' fees of up to \$11 million, plus reimbursement of attorneys' costs and expenses up to \$600,000. The motion for attorneys' fees and costs and class representative service awards will be posted on the website after they are filed. You or your own lawyer may appear at the hearing at your own expense. This is only a summary, so please visit the website for complete information.

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NBA
PREVIEW

THE CROSSOVER

2016-17

ing Power

BY LEE JENKINS



After a wild off-season, the NBA is back. And nowhere will changes be more evident than in Oklahoma City, where point guard **Russell Westbrook** has gone all in on his commitment to the new-look, but still tight-knit, Thunder

Photo Illustration by Stephen Skalocky | Photographs by Robert Beck

AFTER THE milquetoast essay and the token text, Russell Westbrook played dominoes. He had started the game early that July 4 morning, as friends and family filled his sunny backyard for a housewarming party, and he did not stop when his phone throbbed with the news he dreaded. A union that spanned eight seasons in Oklahoma City, producing everything but a championship, was over. The goodbye text, which landed in Westbrook's phone a couple of minutes after the first-person essay appeared online, mentioned a desire for a new journey. Kevin Durant was, of all things, a Warrior. "The team that just beat us," Westbrook muttered over dominoes.

His guests had come to toast him—a son of South L.A. on a spread in Beverly Hills—but they did not know what to say, and neither did he. The first call came from Thunder assistant general manager Troy Weaver, who heard the disbelief in Westbrook's voice. "You have to do your job," Weaver said, "and trust us to do ours." Then OKC power forward Nick Collison, who had been in the private room at BOA Steakhouse in West Hollywood a week earlier, when Westbrook asked Durant what he could do and how he could change. "He went above and beyond," Collison says. Westbrook offered to fly to the Hamptons mansion where Durant

was holding free-agent pitch meetings.

Westbrook and Durant were not best buds, but they were peerless partners, a souped-up Stockton and Malone, transporting a mini market to the big time. Westbrook's closest friends are actually former high school teammates, long-standing wing men like Donnell Beverly and Demetrius (Juice) Deason, who flank him in summer pickup games and play dominoes with him on the Fourth. "He didn't talk much about what happened," says Beverly. Westbrook didn't disparage Durant. He didn't judge him. All he did was take a picture. When Kendrick Perkins played center for the Thunder, he called teammates "cupcake" if he thought they were acting a little soft. Westbrook and Durant adopted the term in jest. Westbrook posted a bittersweet pic on Instagram: three plates of cupcakes topped by red and blue stars and sprinkles.

Durant's departure was distressing enough without the subsequent piling on, several Warriors suggesting that the former MVP had grown weary of his edgy but explosive point guard, eager for the Big Fun promised by Steph Curry & Family. Durant's move morphed into yet another referendum on Westbrook, despite all the assists he'd delivered and arrows he'd absorbed, wearing the black hat while his costar wore white. "I don't know if Russ was hurt," says center Steven Adams, "because he'd never tell me, and he'd definitely never tell you." Adams recalls a litany of ordeals he has endured in recent years. "Russ is always the first person to help," Adams adds. "But if you try to reciprocate, he's the last person to accept help himself." He bears every burden. He betrays no weakness.

"This is professional sports," Westbrook sniffs. "You have to live with it. I just continued about my day." As the afternoon wore on, and more dominoes were played, Beverly turned the topic to Oklahoma City and the franchise left behind. "I like my team," Westbrook told him. "I still really like my team." His tone took Beverly back a decade, to the blank navy thermal sweat-shirts they wore in layup lines at Leuzinger High, as rivals from Westchester and Artesia rocked shiny jackets with shoe

company logos. Westbrook, desperate for a college scholarship, could have mulled a transfer. "Oh no," he says now, cutting off the question. "No, no, no. That school was where I'm from. It's where my friends went. I was never going to leave. I was never going to be a follower."

Late in his senior season one player quit and two others were ruled academically ineligible. "You can guess how he responded," Beverly says. "Forget 'em. We'll go with what we got. We'll run with who we have. We'll fight to the end.'"



DURANT'S DEPARTURE WAS DISTRESSING, BUT
BURDEN. HE BETRAYS NO WEAKNESS. "THIS IS
HE SAYS. "YOU HAVE TO LIVE WITH IT. I JUST

When Leuzinger fell in the sectional quarterfinals, finishing 25–4, Westbrook staggered to the locker room with cramps buckling both legs. Beverly eyed his fuming friend and worried he might slug an opponent. But Westbrook felt oddly at peace. "You don't win a championship every year," he says. "The moment, the process, the ups and downs, the bumps and bruises, are special to me. We didn't win it all, but we became better, we became closer." He savored the struggle. He treasured the crew.



RUSS DRIVER

Without his running mate of eight years (far left), Westbrook—who had a league-best 18 triple doubles last season—will take on an even bigger role.

WESTBROOK BEARS EVERY

PROFESSIONAL SPORTS,”

CONTINUED ABOUT MY DAY.”

On July 6, Westbrook flew to Oklahoma City to shoot a spot for Jordan Brand. Execs across the league were already speed-dialing the Thunder, convinced they would trade him before he too bolted as a free agent in 2017. After all, Westbrook is 27, from L.A. and loves fashion, and if you dug no deeper, it was easy to connect the dots leading out of town. Westbrook insists that he did not realize on the 6th how Durant's decision would accelerate his own. But unlike so many of his contemporaries, forever jockeying to improve their title shots, Westbrook was doubling down on sinking odds.

He wanted to work out, but the court at Thunder headquarters was being resurfaced, so he drove past the dog-food factory to the old gym where the team had practiced after it moved from Seattle. He told Matt Tumbleson, the p.r. director, to meet him on the floor. Like many in the organization, Tumbleson was tight with Durant and gutted by his exit. Westbrook spent a half hour with Tumbleson.

"We're going to be all right," Westbrook said.

HE NEVER DREAMED he'd reach the NBA, much less become one of its leading men, and in that way he is different from the former prodigies who populate his stratosphere. "I wasn't that good," Westbrook says. "I really wasn't. All I cared about was that my parents didn't have to pay for college. I didn't care where the hell I played after that."

On Dec. 29, 2011, in a home game against the Mavericks, Westbrook started 3 of 11 with seven turnovers. This was one night after he went 0 for 13 and squabbled with Durant on the bench in Memphis. "It was a really tough time for me," Westbrook says. "I was hearing a lot of things." He shot too much. He didn't pass enough. Durant was the savior and he was the foil, getting in the way. "He'd come into my office feeling so beat up," says Weaver. "He didn't understand the criticism. The kid was Brett Favre. Remember how Brett Favre would drop back, see what coverage you were in and believe he could put the ball wherever he wanted. Sometimes



he could. Sometimes you'd pick him off and take it to the house. He wasn't Joe Montana. He wasn't Dan Marino. I had to tell Russell, 'Continue to be who you are. Continue to be Brett Favre.'"

Not every exec would say that. Not every coach would allow it. Not every fan base would encourage it. Not with Durant perched on the wing. "He was playing so bad that night against Dallas, I mean really struggling," Weaver recounts. "But our crowd wouldn't leave him. They just stayed with him. I remember this one kid, up in the Loud City section, chanting 'Rus-sell! Rus-sell!' and then everybody started chanting it." Late in the fourth quarter, after a prolonged stint on the bench, Westbrook converted a three-point play and sank a 17-foot jumper to set up a Durant buzzer beater. "I think his career changed that night," Weaver says. "I think it was the defining moment."

Weaver, in another cross-sport comparison, likens the Thunder to the St. Louis Cardinals. Players are protected and eccentricities embraced. Take Westbrook, for instance, who has his own shower, his own parking spot and his own massage table (marked by a pair of sandals) at the training facility. He is not an isolationist. He is a neat freak, shunning tattoos and piercings, chiding rookie Josh Huestis for

a messy locker ("We keep it clean here") and Adams for untied shoes. When posing for a picture with his coach, Billy Donovan, he ensures that Donovan is holding the basketball so the logo points toward the camera. He makes self-deprecating references about his OCD tendencies. "Sometimes, when he's not looking, I lie on his table and rub my ass on it," Adams says. The big man must be joking. The last person who swiped Westbrook's parking spot got boxed in for the rest of the day.

His sense of order extends to his daily schedule. Shoot from 9 to 9:30 a.m. Breakfast from 9:30 to 10. "If you're a minute late for anything," says athletic trainer Tony Katzenmeier, "he's tapping his wrist and asking what happened." *Lock in*, Westbrook tells Katzenmeier, and everybody else. "I've never known someone like this," says guard Anthony Morrow, "who wasn't in the military." Westbrook listens to the same eclectic playlist on the drive to games, calling both of his parents, Russell Sr. and Shannon. Then he calls them again on the way home.

In the off-season he works out at 8 a.m. at Jesse Owens Park in L.A., where his father trained him, and he still does his dad's drills. He is often alone. "I know what to do," Westbrook says. "I don't need a bunch of people around to give me—



whatever those people give you.” He pays his own bills, a rarity in the NBA, hauling stacks of them into the Thunder lunch room. “This isn’t \$32,” a staffer heard him grouse at a miscalculated invoice. When the team eats dinner on the road, they toss their phones in the middle of the table, so nobody is distracted. The first person to reach for his cell has to pick up the check. Westbrook typically goes home with a free meal. “My life is pretty simple,” he says, contrary to the mad dashes and outrageous outfits he shows the public. When Westbrook was younger, he tried to ingratiate himself with Durant, according to those who knew both. But KD was surrounded by a thick circle of friends and associates. By the time Durant streamlined his entourage and attempted to reciprocate, Westbrook had settled down. He lives in

iel rolled into one. When St. Yves bought a Western Conference All-Star jersey for Westbrook to autograph two years ago, he pleaded, “Don’t write a--hole on this one.” That’s how you break the shell. “Russell takes a long time to feel comfortable with people, to trust people, but he realizes he has that here,” Collison says. “He knows he’s been treated well.”

A blue-chipper like Durant, saddled with whacked-out expectations since adolescence, could have looked at the last eight years as a ringless disappointment. Westbrook, the kid in the blank thermal begging for a scholarship, never would. “This environment is a huge part of how I got to this point,” Westbrook says. “There’s a sense of comfort for me here.” During nationally televised games Westbrook can come across as chilly in his sideline interviews. But on local broadcasts his demeanor is much warmer, which is no coincidence. In 2012, Thunder sideline reporter Lesley McCaslin challenged Westbrook on his clipped answers. “I have to ask you these questions,” McCaslin said, “and you’ve got to help me out.”

Westbrook will never be a garrulous speaker, but he respected McCaslin’s candor. During the playoffs last spring McCaslin was pregnant, and Westbrook pestered her about when she was starting maternity leave. She didn’t understand why he was so interested. Finally, after a flight from San Antonio to Oklahoma City, Westbrook led McCaslin through the airport parking lot and popped the trunk of his car. Inside was a Maclaren stroller. “He’s more human than people would ever think,” McCaslin says. “He just doesn’t want you to know that.” When McCaslin thanked Nina for picking out the stroller, soon to be occupied by baby Hunter, Westbrook’s wife laughed. “That wasn’t me,” she said. “That was all Russell.”

Not long after Durant’s decision Westbrook returned to Oklahoma City for his annual basketball camp, and general manager Sam Presti met him back at the dog-food gym. The Thunder were prepared to offer Westbrook a maximum contract extension, and if he turned it down, they’d have no choice but to consider those trade offers. “I don’t want you

WESTBROOK DOESN'T SEE HIS EIGHT YEARS IN OKC AS A RINGLESS

DISAPPOINTMENT. “THIS ENVIRONMENT IS A HUGE PART OF HOW I GOT TO THIS

POINT,” HE SAYS. “THERE’S A SENSE OF COMFORT FOR ME HERE.”



THUNDER ROAD

Westbrook made his way through a throng of fans at the press conference announcing his extension.

the Oklahoma City suburbs with his wife, Nina, whom he met at UCLA. He does not drink. He toils over his clothing designs.

Westbrook’s shell is tough, but you know you are cracking it when he starts calling you an “a--hole” or a “piece of s---.” You’re really getting somewhere when he flips you off. The Thunder have understood this quirk of personality since June 2008, when he swaggered into the Furtao Center in Seattle for the first time. Marc St. Yves, the Sonics’ legendary equipment manager, greeted him at the front door. St. Yves wanted to know if Westbrook was going to stick with the number 0 he wore with the Bruins. St. Yves does not remember Westbrook’s exact response, but it was something like, “Get my f----- zero ready.” St. Yves turned to the security guard and rolled his eyes. “This kid is going to be fun,” he said, shaking his head.

He had no idea. St. Yves now cusses Westbrook like a longshoreman and loves him like Gary Payton and Xavier McDan-

to do this because you feel you need to,” Presti said. “I want you to do it because you want to.” Westbrook could have told Presti that he’d talk about free agency next year, setting up the Summer of Russ, and all the ensuing attention. But Presti had a pretty good feeling that he wouldn’t. “One way or another he lets you know where you stand,” Adams says, “and he doesn’t do it with a whisper. He does it with a few more decibels than that.”

For someone who is loath to change, slow to trust and attached to routine, the choice was easy. “You remember the people you’ve been in the trenches with,” Westbrook says. Besides, he’d earn more money in Oklahoma City.

On Aug. 4, Westbrook signed a three-year, \$86 million extension, and then ducked into St. Yves’s office. An early version of the 2016–17 schedule was out, and Westbrook wanted to see it. Every year he loses himself in the schedule, reviewing

competing. I don’t. Watch those games and tell me I don’t play the same way.”

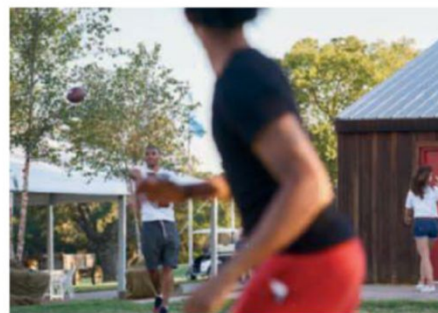
He was a football star first, a heat-seeking tailback, pounding between Pop Warner tackles and looking for linebackers to level. “I liked to hit,” Westbrook says, gazing down at the scars that stripe his arms, badges from runs up the middle. “I liked contact.” He brought the gridiron to the hardwood, taking no breaks, tolerating no lapses, regarding the T-Wolves just as he does the Dubs. But then a quote is relayed to him from another NBA star he knows well. “I don’t pay to watch sporting events, but I would pay to watch Russell Westbrook against Golden State.” At this, he unleashes a delirious laugh.

Media and fans are prone to hyperbole, but even Westbrook’s peers speculate about his upcoming campaign in terms normally reserved for natural phenomena. They expect him to breathe fire, hottest on Nov. 3, but inextinguishable every other

turning Oklahoma City into a wildly entertaining if ultimately nonthreatening solo act, or by moving the ball and lifting a young core back toward contention.

“Let’s say Russell becomes a one-man wrecking machine, night in and night out: Where’s the growth in that?” asks Donovan. “Can you develop the rest of the roster to complement Russell and help Russell? He’s so bright. I think he understands the importance of having guys he can rely on.”

Sometimes the wrecking ball prevails. In the 2000–01 season Allen Iverson hauled the 76ers to the Finals, with a starting lineup that featured George Lynch, Tyrone Hill, Theo Ratliff and Eric Snow. An assistant coach was Maurice Cheeks, now with the Thunder. “We’ve talked about that team,” Donovan says. “Iverson took the majority of the shots and did the scoring. They had great defenders and rebounders. If you look at the stats, there was so much attention on Iverson,



hotel choices and departure times. For 30 minutes he studied the document, his eyes burning holes in it. St. Yves didn’t ask if he was looking at any games in particular. He didn’t have to.

WESTBROOK IS making the case, impossible as it may be, that the Clippers game on Nov. 2 will mean as much to him as the Warriors game on Nov. 3 or the Timberwolves game on Nov. 5. “Who it is, what day, what time, pickup, not pickup, I only know how to play one way,” he says. “There’s nothing extra. I don’t need it. I already have it. My duty is to give all I have. Other people have to think about

night as well. Can he score 35 points per game? Can he average a triple double? Can he go one-on-four at Oracle Arena and rip the hoop from the stanchion? In a season when the champion appears preordained—and the runner-up as well—Westbrook is the most captivating subject.

There is basis for the hype. When Durant was recovering from foot surgery in early 2015, Westbrook embarked on a two-month offensive binge reminiscent of Oscar Robertson, making 40/15/10 stat lines look commonplace. The everlasting question—*What could Durant do if untethered from Westbrook for 82 games?*—was suddenly flipped on its head. *What could Westbrook do?* He can answer that in a couple of different ways, either by

JUST LIKE THAT, WESTBROOK AND DURANT

A DAMN: “I DIDN’T CARE ABOUT THAT THEN,

THINGS, BAD THINGS, I’M GOING TO DO THE

they killed teams when he shot and they got offensive rebounds.”

Oklahoma City, with its length and toughness, is not so different. Power forward Enes Kanter pulled down 18.5 rebounds per 48 minutes last season, fifth in the NBA, and Adams gathered 12.7. Andre Roberson is a stopper on the wing, and Victor Oladipo, acquired from the Magic in the deal involving Serge Ibaka, is

a more dynamic scorer than any of those old Sixers. But for every Iverson there have been countless solo shows who failed to cause a playoff ripple—including Westbrook in '15, when the Thunder missed the postseason. OKC lacks outside scoring, an issue for Westbrook, who figures to find driving lanes clogged. "I have to do what's best for the team," he says. "I have to gauge that. And as a leader you have to gauge how you help other guys get better. I want to make sure everybody feels comfortable about what they're doing."

The Thunder are not making the Finals this year, barring an Iversonian surge, but they are not going to be the 2010 Cavaliers, either. They privately prefer to be compared to the Cardinals, strained as it may be, who lost Albert Pujols in '11 and reached the World Series in '13. Westbrook has never been the franchise face, but he has long prepared for the day. Over the past few years he has watched game film to evaluate his body language and tried to tailor his style of communication depending on the recipient.

"He blasts me all the time because I'm fine with it," Adams says. "He can scream in the middle of a game, 'F--- that!' and we're totally cool. But I see him take another approach with others." The Thunder heard the off-season indictments, that Westbrook is difficult to play alongside, and compared with Curry those claims may be true. But the same used to be said



TEAM BUILDING

Four months after losing to the Dubs in the conference finals, Westbrook and his mates had a field day (opposite page).

alternate tongue lashings with *attaboys*. "All eyes in the room are on him, where they used to be split," Weaver says. "Russell could be the hard charger, and Kevin would go pick guys up. He needs to be a little more understanding, a little more sensitive. I think he will. I think that's in him." Weaver flashes back to Khelcey Barrs, Westbrook's high school teammate and best friend, who died during a pickup game in 2004 and was later found to have an enlarged heart. When Weaver scouted Westbrook four years later, he came across a piece of personal information that froze him. "Do you know that after the boy died, Russell would go over to his grandmother's house and do his chores?" Weaver asks. "Part of the reason we liked him was his compassion."

Super teams are as endearing as hedge funds, so even if Westbrook scowls all season, he will still be the league's darling. Just like that, he and Durant switched hats, not that he gives a damn. "I didn't care about that then, and I won't care about it now," Westbrook says. "Good things, bad things, I'm going to do the same things, like it or love it. Before, nobody liked it, and now everybody loves it. Doesn't matter to me either way."

What does matter is the picnic. One af-

ternoon every September, the Thunder hop on Route 66 and head to Arcadia Farms, 30 miles north. Almost everyone in the organization, plus spouses and children and a few Disney characters, gather on a grassy bluff for food and football, cornhole and karaoke. The first year, Presti counted 60 people under the pine trees. Now, there are more than 250. Westbrook, in a white T-shirt and gray shorts, mirrored sunglasses and red-and-black Jordans, is the Pied Piper. He holds Presti's 18-month-old son, Nicholas. He teaches handshakes to Tumbleson's four-year-old, Teddy. He encourages teammates to mingle. *Lock in.* Kanter bounds down an inflatable slide. Roberson poses for a caricature. One backup point guard, Cameron Payne, fires a water gun. Another, Ronnie Price, drops a line into a pond. Adams compares mustaches with Captain Hook. ("Bastard," he mutters, defeated.) Oladipo serenades Tinker Bell with "I Believe I Can Fly." ("Any duets here?" he asks, and she rises from her hay bale.)

Westbrook, cradling a football, surveys the folksy tableau. Oladipo and Tinker Bell have moved on from R. Kelly to John Legend. *Even when I lose I'm winning, 'cause I give you all of me, and you give me all of you.* A year ago Westbrook was running fly patterns with Durant on the bluff, and now he is throwing spirals to Nina. Finally, he fires one deep, into a bouncy house, and kids scatter with terror and glee. Their laughter fills the farm as Westbrook turns to leave, having crashed one fun house, locked in on another. □

SWITCHED HATS, NOT THAT HE GIVES

AND I WON'T CARE ABOUT IT NOW. GOOD

SAME THINGS, LIKE IT OR LOVE IT."

about Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant, both of whom call Westbrook the current player who most reminds them of their younger selves. "This is the way I look at it," says Kanter. "When he yells at me that I need to do a better job, it's probably because I need to do a better job."

Just as Westbrook will have to strike a balance between carrying teammates and enabling them, he will also need to



NBA
PREVIEW
THE CROSSOVER
2016-17

The Stopper

*With a championship hanging in the balance, Cavs forward **Kevin Love** came through in the biggest moment of his life—on the court, at least—by trusting in his preparation and shutting down the greatest scorer on the planet*

BY LEE JENKINS



GREG NELSON

SHADOWED WARRIOR

Staying close to Curry, Love kept the scorer from tying Game 7.

Photograph by
Michael J. Lebrecht II
NBAE/Getty Images

ON JUNE 19, Tyler Kandel sat at a back table at Warren 77 in New York City, eating chicken nachos and drinking craft beer. The TVs were tuned to Game 7 of the NBA Finals, and Kandel was rooting for the Cavaliers because he went to college with their power forward, Kevin Love. With 44 seconds left and Cleveland up by three, Kandel's old friend flashed on the screen, isolated at the top of the circle against the best shooter on the planet, who dribbled figure eights 35 feet from the hoop. To everyone watching, this was the most critical moment of Love's life. To Tyler Kandel, it ranked a distant second.

In September 2008, Kandel had just graduated from UCLA, where he played water polo. Love, a Bruins basketball star, was preparing for his first training camp in Minnesota. On one of their last nights in Westwood, they ate dinner at a sushi restaurant with UCLA small forward Josh Shipp, then walked down Levering Avenue to a party in an apartment west of campus.

Halfway down the hill, they paused. Kandel held a 40-ounce bottle of Olde English malt liquor in his left hand. Shipp was carrying his own bottle as well. Kandel, messing with his buddy, wound up to kick Shipp's bottle. It was as if he slipped on a banana peel. "I flew up in the air," Kandel recalls, "and my left leg went under me." Love and Shipp cracked up as Kandel landed on his back. They did not realize that Kandel's bottle

had shattered in the fall and glass had sliced his left wrist. Kandel reflexively covered the cut with his right hand. As he released it, to check the wound, blood spewed onto the street. “I could see inside my hand, inside my wrist,” Kandel says. “The artery was split wide open.”

The laughter stopped. Kandel heard Love scream at Shipp to call the police. “You aren’t going to die tonight,” Love said. Kandel was wearing a black T-shirt, and Love tore it from his chest. Love’s mother, Karen, worked as a nurse at Legacy Emanuel Medical Center in Portland when he was growing up. He had never made a tourniquet, but he had seen it done before. Kandel yowled as Love tied the shirt into a knot around his wrist. “That was the most painful part,” Kandel remembers.

As the ambulance rushed Kandel to UCLA Medical Center, EMTs asked him who tied the tourniquet. Kandel looked down at his green Tretorn hightops, the white toe caps stained red, and mumbled something about a friend. “Whoever it was,” one EMT said, “just saved your life.” A few more minutes, they estimated, and Kandel would have bled to death.

During the 12-hour operation that ensued, surgeons repaired the gash in his wrist, but they could not reattach all of the nerves. Kandel spent the next year

CEASE AND ASSIST

Before he denied Curry (near right) and became a champion (far right), Love saved the life of his UCLA classmate Kandel (below left).



in physical therapy while remaining in photography classes at the ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, where he learned to load film and take pictures with one hand. He read about a disabled Czech photographer, missing one arm, for inspiration. Whenever he saw Love, he showed off the scar that runs from his palm to his wrist.

Now 31, Kandel is an acclaimed photographer in Los Angeles and an assistant water polo coach at the vaunted Harvard-Westlake School. His left hand lacks muscle tone and often cramps, but he can use it. He can catch a ball and handle a camera. He can also dip a nacho and clutch a beer—though he’s graduated from Olde E—as his friend switches onto Steph Curry and faces down a half-century of sorry sports history.

“What I thought about in the last minute,” Kandel says, “is that Kevin does what he has to do.”

LOVE PLAYED AAU ball with Isaiah Thomas and then with Brandon Jennings, future NBA point guards, and after practices he challenged them to games of one-on-one. “It was comical,” Love says. The sight of a pudgy power forward, attempting to shadow a blurry ballhandler, amused spectators at the ABCD Camp in New Jersey and the Bob Gibbons Tournament in North Carolina. But for every time Love was beaten to the hole by Thomas and Jennings, there was a play when he managed to stay in front of them, his footwork matching their quickness.

In the final of the 2006 Reebok Big Time Tournament in Las Vegas, the Southern California All-Stars faced Mean Streets from Chicago, a showdown pitting Love against Derrick Rose. “It was close at the end, and Derrick had Kevin on a switch,” recalls Bill Feinberg, a family friend who helped Love handle media requests in high school. “Derrick drib-



COURTESY OF TYLER KANDEL (KANDEL); JOHN BIEVER (UCLA)

"I SAW THE WAY THE GAME WAS GOING," LOVE SAYS. "IT WAS GETTING SMALLER. BIG GUYS WERE MOVING AROUND AND PLAYING ON THE PERIMETER. GUYS LIKE THAT, WHO PLAYED INSIDE-OUT, WERE REALLY HARD TO GUARD."



bled in and out, but Kevin stayed with him. People were aghast." In the final minute Love blocked Rose; SoCal won.

Fourteen months later, Love was at UCLA, and Russell Westbrook was his new one-on-one sparring partner. Love became a first-team All-America and Pac-10 player of the year, but Bruins head coach Ben Howland harped on his defense, occasionally sitting him down the stretch. Love stood 6' 10" and 270 pounds, but nobody nitpicked his weight. He was a modern Moses Malone, acquired by Minnesota from Memphis on draft night in 2008, and in his third season he recorded 53 straight double doubles for the Timberwolves. Love put up 31 points and 31 rebounds against the Knicks, 37 and 23 against the Warriors, 32 and 22 against the Spurs, 31 and 21 against the Thunder. To celebrate, he shed 25 pounds, changing his entire diet and workout regimen.

"I saw the way the game was going," Love says. "It was getting smaller. Big guys were moving around and playing on the perimeter." Love witnessed the evolution up close, contesting Dirk Nowitzki's fadeaways and Tim Duncan's bank shots. "Guys like that, who played

inside-out, were really hard to guard."

Love cut the weight so he could defend them—and mimic them. In 2011–12, he averaged a career-high 26 points, attempting nearly twice as many threes per game as ever before. He was more Dirk than Moses, and when the Cavaliers landed him for No. 1 pick Andrew Wiggins in '14, Love slimmed down even further, dropping to 240 pounds. "I thought we'd run, run, run, and I'd need to be really slender," he says. "I got too skinny."

He looks at pictures from UCLA and says, "That's not me." He also does a double take looking at photos from his introductory press conference in Cleveland. That's not him, either. He discovered early that the Cavaliers were not going to run as much as he had anticipated. He vowed to add muscle in the summer. But then he dislocated his shoulder in the playoffs, requiring surgery, and doctors banned him from the weight room during rehab. Cavs performance director Alex Moore, the former strength and conditioning coordinator for the U.S. ski team, took Love to the squad's headquarters in Park City, Utah, for six weeks that off-season. Love trained 7,000 feet above sea level but was not allowed to lift anything heavier than 30 pounds.

Playing power forward alongside LeBron James and another ball-dominant scorer is tricky enough at full strength. "It's extremely difficult," warned Chris Bosh, Miami's third wheel, in a Bleacher Report story from 2014, "and extremely frustrating." You don't get the ball when you are accustomed, but more important, you don't get it *where* you are accustomed. Love stood on the perimeter, spacing the floor as James and Kyrie Irving drove. "People tell you, 'You're going to have to change what you do,'" Love says, "but until you're in it, you can't really understand what that means. It's a dose of humility."

Love averaged 16.2 points and 9.8 rebounds in his first two seasons with the Cavaliers, a respectable stat line on any roster but well short of the standard he set in Minnesota. Last December, he shot 37.3% from the floor, making

EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES (ACTION); DAVID LIAW/KYLE/IMBA/GETTY IMAGES (PARADE)

it easier to bench him for defense and blame him for losses. “I don’t know how it happened, but he caught all the grief for everything, and it wasn’t fair,” says Cleveland head coach Tyronn Lue, who succeeded David Blatt last January. “Guys like LeBron and Kyrie, they have the ball in their hands, and the bigs take what they can get. Everybody sacrifices, but Kevin sacrificed the most.”

Love sat next to Cavaliers wing James Jones on charter flights, head buried in Jones’s iPad, asking the 13-year vet what he saw. “I told him, ‘Everyone recognizes you’re an elite player,’” Jones says. “‘All the momentary heartache, dissatisfaction, trouble, stress . . . you have to trust yourself. Trust your game. There’s nothing you need to add. You have every tool.’” When Lue took over, he implemented more post-ups and elbow touches for Love, reconstructing his comfort zone. Lue urged Love to ignore outside criticism and to stop second-guessing himself, but the trading deadline loomed, along with speculation about a deal.

Cleveland general manager David Griffin did not want to move Love but understood if he wanted to leave, maybe for a place where he could be the sole superstar again. Griffin said as much in the trainers’ room at Quicken Loans Arena on Feb. 10, where Love was undergoing treatment for an injured shoulder while the Cavaliers played the Lakers.

“I want to be a champion,” Love replied.

GRIFFIN MADE a trade at the deadline that affected Love even if it didn’t involve him. When stretch forward Channing Frye arrived in Cleveland from Orlando, he was baffled by what he found. “Channing was like, ‘Dude, we’re in first place, we’re the No. 1 seed, we have a chance to win the championship. Why is everyone here so *serious*?’” recounts Cavaliers swingman Richard Jefferson. “We all took a step back and said, ‘You know, that’s a really valid point.’”

Frye buddied up to Jefferson, and the Arizona alums threw their arms around Love. “He’s a West Coast guy, and he has

no kids, so we started telling him we were coming over,” Jefferson says. “Channing was like, ‘Just a heads-up, we’ll be at your place after practice, nap on the couch downstairs, drinks at five, dinner at seven.’” *O.K.*, Love thought, *I guess I’m hosting*. Love is no recluse, but he had been searching for his niche in Cleveland, on the court and off. The Triangle, as Jefferson, Frye and Love refer to their corner of the locker room, helped him find it.

“I know it sounds like we didn’t give him a choice,” Jefferson continues, “and in some ways we didn’t. But he didn’t have to open the door. He didn’t have to pay for all the food and the drinks. We couldn’t have let him in if he didn’t

“[LOVE] CAUGHT ALL THE GRIEF, AND IT WASN’T FAIR,” LUE SAYS. “GUYS LIKE
LEBRON AND KYRIE, THEY HAVE THE BALL IN THEIR HANDS, AND THE BIGS TAKE
WHAT THEY CAN GET. EVERYBODY SACRIFICES, BUT KEVIN SACRIFICED THE MOST.”

want to be in.” By spring, dinners for three had swelled to 15, and Love was still buying. He likened the Cavaliers to the Idiots, those famously scruffy 2004 Red Sox, who erased a daunting playoff deficit and ended a historic title drought.

Love rededicated himself to workouts with Moore, hitting the iron and becoming the rare player to add weight mid-season. “Your time will come,” Love’s trainer and friend, Rob McClanaghan, told him. “I don’t know when it will be, but with everything you’ve done, you’ll be ready.” A maddening winter turned to a promising spring. When Lue singled out Love after a loss in Brooklyn in March—“You’re a bad mother-----, too,” Lue barked. “If you’re open in the post, demand the basketball”—Love was not embarrassed. He was emboldened.

Love was spectacular in the playoffs, right up until the whole world tuned in. The Warriors are an impossible matchup for a power forward, particularly when the Dubs downsize, forcing a giant to keep pace with a jitterbug. “It’s hell,” Love says. Golden State hunts his ilk in pick-and-rolls, choreographing plays to



LOVE’S TRIANGLE

Forming a bond with fellow Pac-12 alums Jefferson and Frye (right), the Cavs’ big man found his niche in Cleveland on the court and off.

get a guy like Love switched onto a guy like Curry. Easy money. In Game 1 the Cavaliers lost by 15 points. In Game 2 Love sustained a concussion and listened to the second half in a dark room at Oracle Arena. Doctors ruled him out of Game 3, even though Love swore he could play, and Lue brought him off the bench for Game 4. He scored two points with three rebounds in Game 5 and found early foul trouble in Game 6. A Warriors series is no time to evaluate Love, but that didn’t stop everybody but Griffin from doing it anyway. “I never got trapped by dogma, which is living with the results of other people’s thinking,” Love explains, quoting Steve Jobs. “I focused on my own inner voice the whole time. That voice was saying, ‘Past is past. It might be one game, one half, one quarter, one play. You have to make your mark.’”

Fail quickly, Flip Saunders used to



tell him when they were in Minnesota. In other words, *recover* quickly. Love focused on hopeful harbingers, like the bus ride across the Bay Bridge to a practice in Oakland before Game 5, when LeBron blurted from the back of the bus: “This is our destiny. It’s already written.” And the commencement address Jobs gave at Stanford, which LeBron played for the Cavs, just a few days after Love bought a T-shirt with a line from that very speech: STAY HUNGRY STAY FOOLISH. “Oh,” LeBron beamed when Love wore the shirt, “that’s so sick.”

At halftime of Game 7, Love was unnerved. “Are we playing hard enough?” he asked Lue. “It doesn’t feel like we’re playing hard enough. It doesn’t feel like a Game 7.” Lue agreed, and parroted the message to the locker room. “This is Game 7 of the NBA Finals,” he intoned. “We need to cash in this moment.”

With 50 seconds remaining, Love stood at the left elbow as Curry crossed half-court. He diagnosed the action immediately. “We’d seen it so many times,” Love says. A screen by Andre Iguodala at the top of the key, prompting a switch onto Draymond Green, and a second screen by Green on the right wing, prompting a switch onto Curry. Exactly what the Warriors wanted. The guy who supposedly couldn’t miss against the guy who supposedly couldn’t guard. “That’s Steph’s thing,” Love says, “get switched onto a big guy and break him down.” The unanimous MVP started left, dribbled behind his back, and probed right. He threw a crossover and a step-back, the moves that singed defenders all season. “It was like in *Old School* when Will Ferrell is on the debate team,” Love laughs. “What happened? I blacked out!” He stayed on Curry’s hip, his hands up and his feet down. Curry passed to Green, who passed back.

“He’s going to have to do this *again*?” Lue thought, irritated that Love did not stick with Curry and deny the pass back. Curry faked a 40-footer, and Love lunged but didn’t leap. Curry drove left and tried another step-back, but Love contested with his left hand. Curry crossed over, and Love contested with his right. The shot clock was down to :04. Curry had to let fly. “He can get separation with any of those moves,” Love says. “More than that, it’s the release. He has such a quick release.” During a film session after Game 6, Lue told Love he was giving Curry and Klay Thompson too much space. “You think you’re there, but it’s not the same against these guys,” Lue said. “You’re not there. You have to get *here*.” He demonstrated with something very close to a chest bump. As Curry fired, Love followed his eyes. “So many times, he looks at the person he’s shooting over,” Love says. “I was like, ‘Is he going to look at me?’” He didn’t look.

Three plays defined Cleveland’s first championship in 52 years. “The Block, the Shot and the Stop, maybe in that order,” Love says. Maybe. But you expect LeBron to deliver a superhuman swat and Kyrie to sink a fadeaway three. You do not expect Kevin Love to smother

Steph Curry, and yet, the Stop was no fluke. From Isaiah Thomas to Ben Howland, from Flip Saunders to Tyronn Lue, from 270 pounds to 240, he trained for it.

“HARDEST THING you’ve ever done?” Bosh asked, when he ran into Love after the Finals at the Montage hotel in Beverly Hills. “Oh, yeah,” Love sighed. “Hardest thing.” Winning changes people, and while Love struggles to articulate how, the man nicknamed Champ does not. “When you’re losing, you’re constantly searching because you’re never getting the result you want,” explains Jones, who has accompanied LeBron to three titles. “When you win, you start to trust yourself, because you see that the path you’ve taken works. You can finally sit back and say, ‘I do have the skill set. I do have the approach. I do know how to prepare.’ And you have the confidence to do it again.”

Love returned to Park City with Moore this summer for another six-week grind, but he wasn’t just building endurance this time. When Love reported back to the Cavaliers practice facility, he was a chiseled 248 pounds. Stories about players adding off-season muscle are a training-camp cliché, but Love did 15 reps of the dumbbell bench at 100 pounds compared with 10 at 80 a year ago. Then he hosted the Cavs for dinner after they screened *The Birth of a Nation*. Of course, there will be nights that Love scores eight points. Such is life on a superteam. But it’s easier to endure the lean times after experiencing the ultimate upshot. “In a weird way, winning made me hungrier, like I have more to prove,” Love says. “It always comes back more to what I can’t do than what I can.”

He swears he has not replayed Game 7, has not deconstructed the Stop, and he may be the only person in Northeast Ohio able to say that. Even in L.A., the Harvard-Westlake water polo team studied the sequence one day this summer, to examine the effort a champion expends. Tyler Kandel sat quietly among them, the scar running down his left hand, watching the friend who did what he had to do. □



THE CROSSOVER
NBA
PREVIEW
2016-17

Scouting R

TELLING NUMBERS BY BEN GOLLIVER,
ROB MAHONEY, ROHAN NADKARNI
AND ANDREW SHARP

BOYS OF SUMMER

The Cavs and the Warriors faced off in the Finals for the second straight time in 2016. No two teams have ever met three years in a row. But that's about to change.

#NBAFinals



sports

On Oct. 25, the Cavs will get their rings and open the NBA season against the Knicks. Then, after 1,229 more games (plus the playoffs), we'll end up in the exact same place we were the last two Junes: watching the Warriors and the Cavs battle in the Finals. And when the rubber match is over, they'll be celebrating in the Bay Area

Photograph by John W. McDonough



Eastern Projections

- 1 CAVALIERS
- 2 CELTICS
- 3 RAPTORS
- 4 PISTONS
- 5 HORNETS
- 6 HAWKS
- 7 PACERS
- 8 WIZARDS
- 9 KNICKS
- 10 BUCKS
- 11 BULLS
- 12 HEAT
- 13 MAGIC
- 14 76ERS
- 15 NETS

Conference Finals

CAVALIERS
OVER CELTICS



Western Projections

- 1 WARRIORS
- 2 SPURS
- 3 CLIPPERS
- 4 TRAIL BLAZERS
- 5 THUNDER
- 6 JAZZ
- 7 GRIZZLIES
- 8 ROCKETS
- 9 TIMBERWOLVES
- 10 MAVERICKS
- 11 PELICANS
- 12 SUNS
- 13 NUGGETS
- 14 KINGS
- 15 LAKERS

Conference Finals

WARRIORS
OVER SPURS

NBA Finals

WARRIORS OVER
CAVALIERS



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Cleveland

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH TYRONN LUE

(2nd season with Cavaliers)

2015-16 RECORD 57-25

(1st in Central)

PG KYRIE IRVING

19.6 PPG; 4.7 APG; 44.8 FG%; 32.1 3FG%

SG J.R. SMITH

12.4 PPG; 1.7 APG; 41.5 FG%; 40.0 3FG%

SF LEBRON JAMES

25.3 PPG; 7.4 RPG; 6.8 APG; 52.0 FG%

PF KEVIN LOVE

16.0 PPG; 9.9 RPG; 41.9 FG%; 36.0 3FG%

C TRISTAN THOMPSON

7.8 PPG; 9.0 RPG; 0.6 BPG; 58.8 FG%

BENCH

SF MIKE DUNLEAVY*

7.2 PPG; 2.7 RPG; 41.0 FG%; 39.4 3FG%

SG IMAN SHUMPERT

5.8 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 37.4 FG%; 29.5 3FG%

PF CHANNING FRYE

6.1 PPG; 3.3 RPG; 43.8 FG%; 38.7 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Cavaliers

TELLING NUMBER

25.2

As long as the Cavs have LeBron James, the baseline expectation is that they reach the Finals. But it was Kyrie Irving who surprised the world against the Warriors last June. He outplayed Steph Curry for two weeks. He exploded

for 41 points in Game 5 to help turn the Finals upside down. He finished off Game 7 with a pull-up three over Curry to win the title. All told, **Irving scored 25.2 points per game in the playoffs.** What if that was just the beginning?

James came back to Cleveland in the summer of 2014 for myriad reasons, but Irving's presence was near the top of the list. At the time, Irving was 22 and an All-Star, but he had plenty of room to grow. At 24 he still does. Last spring was a level we'd never seen before from Irving—better shooting, perfectly picking his spots, bailing out Cleveland over

and over again in the half-court.

LeBron—who just finished his 11th season of at least 2,700 minutes—will need help as he navigates the next six months. And come June he'll need another superhero to have a shot against the Golden State Death Star. Irving played that role for two months. Let's see if he can do it for a whole season. —A.S.

Ty Lue did a nice job. He'll be better this year than he was last year, when there were definitely growing pains. Ty's always had a great ability to command the respect of his peers and his teammates, and now his players. **LeBron James** respects him. **Kyrie Irving** respects him. They have a lot of good players, and he got them to try on defense and to share the ball. . . . **Kevin Love** is making it work in a difficult situation for him. They were probably going to trade him this summer, but then they won, and he played decently and had that great defensive stand on the key possession [in Game 7 of the Finals]. But Kevin was very unhappy last year; I expect he'll be pretty unhappy this year. He's still a very good player despite some limitations. . . . I see Kyrie continuing to be a brilliant offensive player. His defense is really bad, and without Matthew Dellavedova [who signed with the Bucks] to push him, it might be even worse. His great ability is that he can create his own shot and score at the rim, pretty much at will. In a key situation, like in the Finals, that's really valuable. . . . In the regular season, if LeBron's resting or out, they'll struggle a little. Kyrie does not make his teammates better the same way LeBron does. He doesn't defend with enough effort. . . . Who knows what's going on with **Iman Shumpert**? He really struggled in the playoffs. And he just seems to have a lot of weird stuff going on, in general. . . . Nobody in the East can seriously threaten them when it matters. But I don't see them being anywhere near the caliber of the Warriors.



BOTTOM LINE | It's crazy to bet against the Warriors, but if the Cavs are clicking, betting against them isn't much easier.

**ROYAL
TREATMENT**

In leading the Cavs to their first title, James reached his sixth straight Finals, a feat last accomplished 50 years ago.

Photographs by
Greg Nelson



PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH BRAD STEVENS

(4th season with Celtics)

2015-16 RECORD 48-34

(2nd in Atlantic)

PG ISAIAH THOMAS

22.2 PPG; 6.2 APG; 42.8 FG%; 35.9 3FG% →

SG AVERY BRADLEY

15.2 PPG; 2.1 APG; 44.7 FG%; 36.1 3FG%

SF JAE CROWDER

14.2 PPG; 5.1 RPG; 44.3 FG%; 33.6 3FG%

PF AMIR JOHNSON

7.3 PPG; 6.4 RPG; 1.1 BPG; 58.5 FG%

C AL HORFORD*

15.2 PPG; 7.3 RPG; 3.2 APG; 50.5 FG%

BENCH

PG MARCUS SMART

9.1 PPG; 4.2 RPG; 3.0 APG; 34.8 FG%

PF JONAS JEREKBO

4.4 PPG; 3.7 RPG; 41.3 FG%; 39.8 3FG%

C KELLY OLYNYK

10.0 PPG; 4.1 RPG; 45.5 FG%; 40.5 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Celtics

TELLING NUMBER

34.6

They have a young, defensively tenacious team that seems tailor-made for the modern NBA. The only problem? They struggle to make shots. **Boston hit just 34.6% of its catch-and-shoot threes** last season, second-worst behind the

hapless Lakers. Simply put, the Celtics have a bunch of three-and-D guys who haven't quite grasped the *three* part yet. The biggest improvements need to come from Jae Crowder and Marcus Smart. The 6' 6" Crowder shot 33.6% from deep,

which means he's close to becoming a reliable stretch option. He's otherwise skilled on offense and so good defensively that a three-point stroke would likely make him an All-Star. Smart is arguably the team's best defender behind Avery Bradley, but he shot a ghastly 25.3% from beyond the arc last year.

Bradley can serve as a model

for his teammates. He's increased his volume of outside shots in each of his six seasons and for the most part has maintained his efficiency, putting up a solid 36.0% career mark. If Crowder can be that accurate and Smart can surpass 30%, Boston could have an offense to match its top five defense. And that would put the defending champs on notice. —R.N.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Boston

Al Horford is a really, really big upgrade for them. He's a little older [30] and has a few more miles on his legs, but he fits the way they want to play. He'll improve their defense and he's also an offensive threat—not so much in the post, but in the pick-and-roll. He's a good 18-foot shooter, a playmaking center. They didn't have that in Jared Sullinger [who is now with Toronto]. . . . I think **Amir Johnson** will start, but they have the option of moving **Jae Crowder** to the four and playing **Marcus Smart**, **Avery Bradley** and **Isaiah Thomas** together as a small team that'll be really good defensively. That's a great option. . . . Thomas has a great ability to get into the lane and use his body. He's only about 5' 9", but he's got long arms with big hands, big shoulders and he can really challenge the bigs. I'm always amazed at some of the stuff he can do when he takes it to the rim. And he's a knock-down pull-up shooter. . . . If Smart improves his shooting he can be the player that everybody thinks he can be. That's always going to be his Achilles' heel. He's strong, great size for a point guard, really can defend. If he comes out [playing] well, there are a lot of options they have with that loaded backcourt—I mean in the way they play and also in assets to make a trade with their high picks. . . . Crowder has to take another step. He's a good player and can lock down threes but I'm not convinced that he is their small forward of the future. [Rookie] **Jaylen Brown**, maybe, will be. . . . Brown will play. He's not a very good shooter, but because he's good defensively and he can run and has good size [6' 7"], he'll get minutes.

WINSLOW TOWNSEND



BOTTOM LINE | Anything short of a conference finals berth would be a disappointment.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Toronto

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH DWANE CASEY

(6th season with Raptors)

2015-16 RECORD 56-26

(1st in Atlantic)

PG KYLE LOWRY

21.2 PPG; 6.4 APG; 42.7 FG%; 38.8 3FG%

SG DEMAR DEROZAN

23.5 PPG; 4.5 RPG; 44.6 FG%; 33.8 3FG%

SF DEMARRE CARROLL

11.0 PPG; 4.7 RPG; 38.9 FG%; 39.0 3FG%

PF JARED SULLINGER*

10.3 PPG; 8.3 RPG; 2.3 APG; 43.5 FG%

C JONAS VALANCIUNAS

12.8 PPG; 9.1 RPG; 1.3 BPG; 56.5 FG%

BENCH

PF PATRICK PATTERSON

6.9 PPG; 4.3 RPG; 41.4 FG%; 36.2 3FG%

PG CORY JOSEPH

8.5 PPG; 3.1 APG; 2.6 RPG; 43.9 FG%

SG TERRENCE ROSS

9.9 PPG; 2.5 RPG; 43.1 FG%; 38.6 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Raptors

TELLING NUMBER

39.3%

They have probably been surpassed by Boston in the Atlantic Division, but the Raptors will still be contenders to reach the Eastern finals. That will only happen, though, if Toronto gets improved play from its stars during the playoffs. In 31 postseason games, **DeMar**

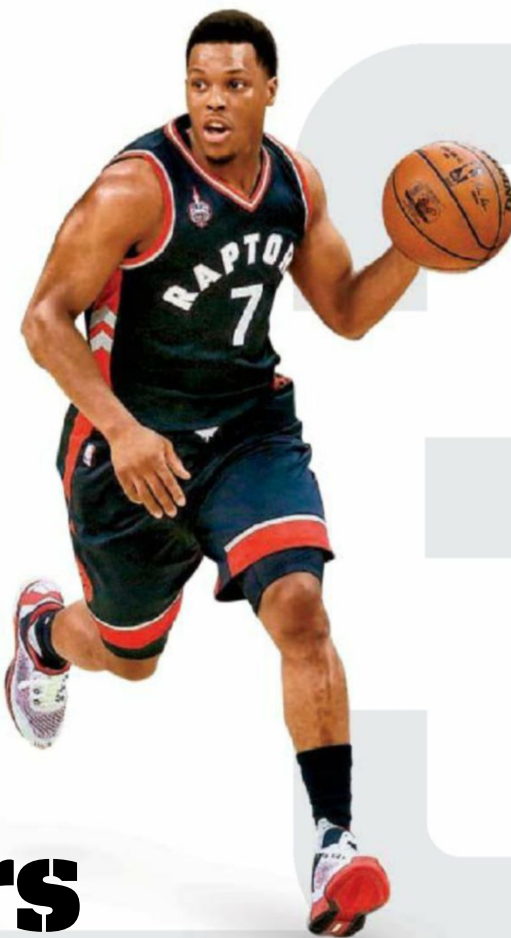
DeRozan has shot 39.3%. That's simply not good enough, especially from a player who signed a five-year, \$139 million deal in July. Still, his accuracy is better than that of his backcourtmate, Kyle Lowry, who is a 38.3% shooter in 44 playoff games. Teams can

too often make Toronto's offense disappear, exploiting DeRozan's lack of range—he made just four threes last postseason—and tightening their grip on Lowry in the paint. To reach the conference finals last year the Raptors needed 14 games to advance past the seventh-seeded Pacers and injury-laden Heat.

Improved play from Jonas Valanciunas would

help, particularly if he commands more attention in the post. The addition of Jared Sullinger also gives coach Dwane Casey the opportunity to try out some spacier lineups.

Lowry and DeRozan can succeed on a big stage—they both won Olympic gold over the summer. If they want a shot at any NBA hardware, they'll have to step up when it matters most. —R.N.



Remember: They probably should have lost to the Pacers in the first round last year, and they almost lost to the Heat in the second round. Both were seven-game series. They weren't the best when it came to the playoffs. . . . Losing [center] Bismack Biyombo [to the Magic] will hurt them a little bit, but the addition of **Jared Sullinger**, alongside **Patrick Patterson**, allows them to spread the floor and be better offensively. . . . **DeMar DeRozan** had a great year and a terrible postseason. It was almost like all season they run sets for him to catch and shoot, then in the playoffs he's trying to go one-on-one. He's a good player, but when you don't shoot well, you're limited. He lost his confidence too. . . . **Kyle Lowry** can make big shots. He can shoot the three; he can run a team. I would put him in the second tier of point guards. . . . It'll help a great deal to have **DeMarre Carroll** healthy. He makes the most sense for them at the three. Good defender, average shooter but gives them the capability to play small. . . . **Jonas Valanciunas** will be a big part of what they do. Each year he gets a little better and last year I thought he was playing really, really well before he got hurt. He's a low-post threat who can step out to 12 feet. He's so strong and he's got good hands. . . . When they picked up **Cory Joseph** last summer, I knew they would use him and Lowry together a lot. When it was crunch time or when they were protecting its lead, they went to that backcourt quite a bit. It was strong. . . . I don't trust **Terrence Ross** as much as I do **Norman Powell**. When Ross doesn't shoot well, he doesn't really help you.



BOTTOM LINE | A solid core is in place, but the Raptors failed to make a substantial improvement.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Detroit

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH STAN VAN GUNDY

(3rd season with Pistons)

2015-16 RECORD 44-38

(3rd in Central)

PG REGGIE JACKSON

18.8 PPG; 6.2 APG; 43.4 FG%; 35.3 3FG%

SG KENTAVIOUS CALDWELL-POPE

14.5 PPG; 3.7 RPG; 42.0 FG%; 30.9 3FG%

SF MARCUS MORRIS

14.1 PPG; 5.1 RPG; 43.4 FG%; 36.2 3FG%

PF TOBIAS HARRIS

14.7 PPG; 6.7 RPG; 46.9 FG%; 33.5 3FG%

C ANDRE DRUMMOND

16.2 PPG; 14.8 RPG; 1.4 BPG; 52.1 FG% →

BENCH

SF STANLEY JOHNSON

8.1 PPG; 4.2 RPG; 37.5 FG%; 30.7 3FG%

PG ISH SMITH*

12.6 PPG; 6.5 APG; 4.0 RPG; 41.1 FG%

PF JON LEUER*

8.5 PPG; 5.6 RPG; 1.1 APG; 48.1 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Pistons

TELLING NUMBER

35.5%

The Pistons have a promising young nucleus—their top six players have an average age of 23.8—and with another year under Stan Van Gundy, they should be even better than last year's 44-win team. But they also face two big questions.

The first concerns point

guard. Reggie Jackson could miss up to two months with tendinitis in his left knee, leaving Detroit to count on above-average backup Ish Smith, 28, to run its spread pick-and-roll. Van Gundy's smoke and mirrors can make decent players look twice as dangerous, but

this will put his sorcery to the test.

The second question centers on the middle. Early last season Andre Drummond looked like a young Moses Malone, putting up 20-rebound games and throwing down thundering alley-oops. By year's end, though, he tailed off. He wasn't always engaged on defense. And Drummond was often too big a liability to even keep on the court,

because **his free throw percentage of 35.5% was the worst in NBA history.**

When he met the media in July to announce his five-year, \$130 million extension, the 23-year-old said he'd "found something that works." The Pistons hope so: Drummond is their best player, but he'll have to be more dependable for them to be able to hang with the East's elite. —A.S.



They will be better for a few reasons. They've got better depth. They have **Tobias Harris** for the full season. They improved at stretch four with **Jon Leuer** and at backup point guard with **Ish Smith**. All their players are young enough that they should all get slightly better—and in the case of **Kentavious Caldwell-Pope** and **Stanley Johnson**, more than slightly better. . . . They have a bunch of decent shooters, but they need some of them to be closer to 40% than 35% from three. Especially KCP, but also Johnson, Harris and **Marcus Morris**. They really need that to give them spacing for the **Andre Drummond** pick-and-rolls. . . . That said, they're pretty versatile defensively with that group. KCP is terrific. If this is the year he starts making more shots, that would help them a ton. . . . Drummond has sort of flatlined. There's a real risk that he's going to get his head messed up with the free throw stuff, like [Andris] Biedrins. He's starting to hot-potato the ball a bit when he gets it. . . . Defensively I think Drummond's a little overrated. He'll have blocks, but he's mostly average, and he struggles in some pick-and-roll situations. It'll be interesting to see whether Stan Van Gundy can make him better, because he helped Dwight [Howard] a lot on that end in Orlando. Drummond doesn't have Dwight's talent, but he's only 23. . . . I'd be interested to see them experiment with some more creative lineups. Like if they played Johnson, Harris and Morris at the three/four/five and those three just switched everything. That would be hard for teams to guard when Drummond's out of the game.

ALLEN EINHORN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | They have the pieces to get out of the first round for the first time since 2008.

INCREIBLE



INEVITABLE

WITH CARBS AND ELECTROLYTES TO
FUEL THE GRIND THAT LEADS TO THE GREAT,
INCREIBLE IS INEVITABLE.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Charlotte

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH STEVE CLIFFORD

(4th season with Hornets)

2015-16 RECORD 48-34

(3rd in Southeast)

PG KEMBA WALKER

20.9 PPG; 5.2 APG; 42.7 FG%; 37.1 3FG%

SG NICOLAS BATUM

14.9 PPG; 6.1 RPG; 5.8 APG; 42.6 FG%

SF MICHAEL KIDD-GILCHRIST

12.7 PPG; 6.4 RPG; 1.3 APG; 54.1 FG%

PF MARVIN WILLIAMS

11.7 PPG; 6.4 RPG; 45.2 FG%; 40.2 3FG%

C CODY ZELLER

8.7 PPG; 6.2 RPG; 0.9 BPG; 52.9 FG%

BENCH

SG JEREMY LAMB

8.8 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 45.1 FG%; 30.9 3FG%

PG RAMON SESSIONS*

9.9 PPG; 2.9 APG; 47.3 FG%; 32.4 3FG%

PF FRANK KAMINSKY

7.5 PPG; 4.1 RPG; 41.0 FG%; 33.7 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Hornets

TELLING NUMBER

3

Their biggest off-season moves weren't acquisitions but retentions. Charlotte brought Nicolas Batum back on a five-year, \$120 million contract to facilitate the offense. Marvin Williams, who was a revelation last year at power forward, signed a

four-year deal worth \$54.5 million.

But the price of holding on to the pair was high. The Hornets couldn't afford to retain guards Jeremy Lin and Courtney Lee, and—in a decision that was as much stylistic as financial—they let low-post scorer Al Jefferson sign with

the Pacers. Each of those **three key lost rotation players** will largely be replaced by budget pickups (point guard Ramon Sessions and center Roy Hibbert) or internal reorganization (shooting guard Jeremy Lamb and center Spencer Hawes).

Charlotte will benefit from the return of Michael Kidd-Gilchrist, who played just seven games last season

due to a shoulder injury. But Batum and Kemba Walker are already coming off career years; it's unreasonable to expect them to do more with less talent around them. Following a season in which they improved by 15 wins, a touch of regression is likely. Charlotte simply doesn't have the same resources, no matter how Steve Clifford might try to make ends meet. —R.M.



I'm leaning toward the Hornets to win the division, but they actually took a half-step backward. [Departed free-agent guards] Jeremy Lin and Courtney Lee had great years, and [departed free-agent center] Al Jefferson was a guy you could rely on to score. . . . Can **Kemba Walker** get much better? I don't think he even needs to. If he consistently has the kind of year he had last year, they'll be good. . . . **Michael Kidd-Gilchrist** is excellent defensively but really limited offensively. Steve Clifford has always emphasized defense and built his team around it. . . . A big part of it was that they changed the way they played. When Jefferson was playing with his butt on the post, they were throwing it in and cutting off. That's not Kemba's game. Kemba needs a high pick. Then they installed **Cody Zeller**. Walker had his best games when Zeller was on the floor and they were running pick-and-roll while spacing the floor. . . . **Marvin Williams** did what he was supposed to do: plant himself in the corner and make threes. He earned himself a nice contract. As long as he can find space, he's gonna make shots. . . . Why are they bringing **Marco Belinelli** in? They must not be high on **Jeremy Lamb**. You see flashes with Lamb, then he disappears. It seems like he doesn't have a strong motor, even though he has good skills. . . . As he gets stronger, **Frank Kaminsky's** asset will be his shooting—being able to stretch the floor as a four. He's not a center—he has small shoulders, he's thin, he doesn't have the strength. Once he starts making shots, he'll be pretty good for them.

BROCK WILLIAMS-SMITH/NEAL/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | Big losses mean they won't stand out from the crowded pack in the middle of the East.

BUZZING BEATER

Walker led the Hornets to 48 wins, the most since the franchise returned to the NBA in 2004.

Photograph by
Kent Smith
NBAE/Getty Images



PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH MIKE BUDENHOLZER

(4th season with Hawks)

2015-16 RECORD 48-34

(2nd in Southeast)

PG DENNIS SCHRODER

11.0 PPG; 4.4 APG; 42.1 FG%; 32.2 3FG%

SG KYLE KORVER

9.2 PPG; 3.3 RPG; 43.5 FG%; 39.8 3FG%

SF KENT BAZEMORE

11.6 PPG; 5.1 RPG; 44.1 FG%; 35.7 3FG%

PF PAUL MILLSAP

17.1 PPG; 9.0 RPG; 1.7 BPG; 47.0 FG%

C DWIGHT HOWARD*

13.7 PPG; 11.8 RPG; 1.6 BPG; 62.0 FG%



BENCH

SF THABO SEFOLOSHA

6.4 PPG; 4.5 RPG; 50.5 FG%; 33.9 3FG%

SG TIM HARDAWAY JR.

6.4 PPG; 1.0 APG; 43.0 FG%; 33.8 3FG%

C TIAGO SPLITTER

5.6 PPG; 3.3 RPG; 0.6 SPG; 52.3 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Hawks

TELLING NUMBER

6.1

Coach Mike Budenholzer has a strong aversion to low-post play. Atlanta had just **6.1 post-up possessions per game last season, fifth-fewest in the NBA.** And many of those happened accidentally: Paul Millsap backing down an undersized opponent, or Al

Horford putting up a hook shot off a deep catch. There were seldom any programmed post operations—the sort of offense that new center Dwight Howard has come to depend on.

Coaches who've failed to indulge Howard's desire for paint touches have risked his

becoming less engaged. That was especially true in Houston, where his field goal attempts dwindled in each of the last three seasons—down to 8.5 per game in 2015-16—and his effectiveness declined.

Style changes are inevitable for a team transitioning from Horford, who left for Boston, to Howard, 30, who signed a three-year, \$75 million deal. But it's hard

to imagine that Budenholzer, who prefers to string multiple actions into a fluid offense, will compromise and feature Howard in the post. Still, it might be worth it for the Hawks to appease the big man with some rolls to the rim and dribble handoffs. Even with his back problems, a motivated Howard can be a vital interior defender, rebounder and finisher. —R.M.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Atlanta

I can't imagine Mike Budenholzer changing the way he plays. I love it—swinging the ball, pushing it, getting a lot of possessions, unselfishness. But **Dwight Howard** wants to plant himself in the post. He's not a threat like Al Horford was from the perimeter, but he's going to want touches. Horford and **Paul Millsap** were always facing the basket. Atlanta only on occasion threw the ball into the post. I don't know how well it's going to work. . . . What they gave up trading Jeff Teague is ball movement. **Dennis Schroder** is more of a pounder; the ball's going to be in his hands and he's going to be looking for his own. Teague was really good at pick-and-roll, spacing the floor, drive-and-kick. Last year they underachieved, so maybe they thought they needed to make changes. . . . **Kyle Korver** is 35. I see him probably taking another half-step back like he did last season. He played better with Teague, too. He will be spotting up somewhere and Schroder won't find him. With Korver's age, **Tim Hardaway Jr.** should have a chance to prove himself. . . . When I watched **Kent Bazemore** play, I fell in love with him. He's improved his three-point shooting, he's athletic and he's really good defensively. I mean *real* good. He can lock you down with his length and quickness. . . . **Tiago Splitter** is a big body who can make an open shot, but he struggles to guard the quicker fives. Horford was really good at that—getting out to the pick-and-pops, rotations—and it's where both Splitter and Howard will struggle. . . . When they have to go to the bench, it's a weakness.

SCOTT CUNNINGHAM/NEAL/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | Significant changes to the starting lineup will force the Hawks to evolve—for better or worse.

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH NATE MCMILLAN

(1st season with Pacers)

2015-16 RECORD 45-37

(2nd in Central)

PG JEFF TEAGUE*

15.7 PPG; 5.9 APG; 43.9 FG%; 40.0 3FG%

SG MONTA ELLIS

13.8 PPG; 4.7 APG; 42.7 FG%; 30.9 3FG%

SF PAUL GEORGE

23.1 PPG; 7.0 RPG; 41.8 FG%; 37.1 3FG%

PF THADDEUS YOUNG*

15.1 PPG; 9.0 RPG; 1.5 SPG; 51.4 FG%

C MYLES TURNER

10.3 PPG; 5.5 RPG; 1.4 BPG; 49.8 FG%

BENCH

SF C.J. MILES

11.8 PPG; 2.7 RPG; 40.9 FG%; 36.7 3FG%

PG RODNEY STUCKEY

8.9 PPG; 2.7 RPG; 41.3 FG%; 24.1 3FG%

PF LAVOY ALLEN

5.4 PPG; 5.4 RPG; 0.5 BPG; 51.6 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Pacers

TELLING NUMBER

16.3

They've overhauled their roster to supercharge the offense, which ranked 17th in the league last year. Defense-first George Hill has been replaced by Jeff Teague to add shooting from the point guard spot. Rim protector Ian Mahinmi has turned into low-post

scorer Al Jefferson, and Thaddeus Young will bring firepower from the wing. On the bench, defensive guru Frank Vogel is now coaching in Orlando, and Nate McMillan will be in charge of overseeing the offensive renaissance. The unstated

goal was to improve enough to persuade Paul George to stay in Indianapolis in two years, when he can opt out of his contract. Some homegrown talent should help too. In a limited role as a rookie last season, **Myles Turner averaged 16.3 points and 8.7 rebounds per 36 minutes.** Now Indiana will need his size and shot blocking to anchor the defense, giving the 6'11" Turner a

chance to turn into a full-fledged star.

As his playing time increases (he averaged just 22.8 minutes in 2015-16), Turner will also be able to show more of his low-post and midrange games. If he blossoms, the 20-year-old can raise the team's ceiling this season—and, if he's good enough to be a running mate for George, make an even bigger impact down the line. —A.S.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Indiana

Almost everyone I've talked to thinks they're going to be better because, on paper, they've added a lot of names and offensive talent. **Jeff Teague** is the obvious one, but there's also **Al Jefferson** and **Thaddeus Young**. . . . People don't think George Hill [now with the Jazz] was good, but he's a stud defender. Teague is nowhere near as good. They're gonna miss Hill. And Jefferson is nowhere near as good defensively as Ian Mahinmi [who's with the Wizards], so they're going to miss Mahinmi too. . . . The other thing is, they lost [coach] Frank Vogel [to Orlando]. They kept Dan Burke, the assistant who was in charge of the defense, but Vogel was the guy holding people accountable. . . . **Paul George** is a top 10 player. He's a great defender when he wants to be, but he conserves energy at times on that end. He's never had a coach who held him accountable for the shots he takes. That could improve in a better-ball-movement, up-tempo offense. . . . If George is your No. 1 playmaker and **Monta Ellis** thinks he's No. 2, where does Teague fit in? If he's just spotting up, how effective is he? There will be stretches when George and Ellis are off the floor where Teague's playmaking really helps them. But I think he probably gives up more defensively than he adds offensively. . . . **Myles Turner** is still a little ways away from being as good as people think he is. He's a very good midrange shooter, he'll make turnaround shots from the post, and he'll throw in the occasional three. He's a very good rim protector. He'll struggle a bit in pick-and-roll defense, but he's got a bright future.



BOTTOM LINE | Indy is a playoff team but will need luck with Turner and heroics from George to make the progress real.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Washington

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH SCOTT BROOKS
(1st season with Wizards)

2015-16 RECORD 41-41
(4th in Southeast)

PG JOHN WALL
19.9 PPG; 10.2 APG; 1.9 SPG; 42.4 FG%

SG BRADLEY BEAL
17.4 PPG; 3.4 RPG; 44.9 FG%; 38.7 3FG% →

SF OTTO PORTER
11.6 PPG; 5.2 RPG; 1.4 SPG; 47.3 3FG%

PF MARKIEFF MORRIS
12.0 PPG; 5.5 RPG; 1.9 APG; 42.5 FG%

C MARCIN GORTAT
13.5 PPG; 9.9 RPG; 1.3 BPG; 56.7 FG%

BENCH

SG MARCUS THORNTON
9.7 PPG; 2.5 RPG; 39.9 FG%; 33.7 3FG%

PG TREY BURKE*
10.6 PPG; 2.3 APG; 41.3 FG%; 34.4 3FG%

C IAN MAHINMI*
9.3 PPG; 7.1 RPG; 1.1 BPG; 58.9 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Wizards

TELLING NUMBER

27

So much of what they are and could be depends on Bradley Beal's health. There is no more versatile scorer on the Wizards' roster; Beal is a pick-and-roll creator, a natural shooter off curls, and a deadly spot-up option who's the perfect complement to

John Wall. Frequent injuries, however, have kept Beal from gaining much developmental traction. **Last year Beal missed 27 games**, the third time in his four seasons he's sat out at least 19. Washington has suffered for it. The hope entering this season is

a familiar one: that Beal's worst impediments are behind him, allowing the 23-year-old to take meaningful steps forward and push the Wizards—who were five games worse last year than in 2014-15—along with him. Beal's getting right won't fix all of the profound weirdness that loomed over the team last season (most notably the tension between

Beal and Wall). It can, however, give Washington its best chance at playoff competence. The floor is better spaced with him on it. Wall's work in piloting the offense is far easier with Beal involved. Just by doing what he does best, Beal anchors Washington's backcourt and protects its shaky bench from overextension. —R.M.

They could have issues lingering from last season. It's well-known that **John Wall** and **Bradley Beal** don't always see eye to eye. That could create problems. . . . If Beal, Wall and **Otto Porter** are all playing together, you have one of the best one-two-three combinations in the East. . . . There's nobody in the league faster from end line to end line than Wall. Nobody can get to the rim and finish like he can. But his lack of perimeter shooting has really held him back. And he's looking to shoot a little more than he probably should. Sometimes he plays too fast, where he's just running past everybody and it's one-on-four. He's got to learn to play more cerebrally. . . . A new start should be a good for **Markieff Morris**. He allows them to play small and space the floor, because you really can't play **Marcin Gortat** and **Ian Mahinmi** together. Morris fits in well with either of them. He'll stretch the floor, he'll be able to run. If he produces at the four and Porter elevates his game, they'll be pretty good offensively. . . . Mahinmi's known as a defensive player and a rebounder. He has the skills to go out and guard the pick-and-pop, which a lot of centers struggle to do. He doesn't have great hands, and doesn't have the touch Gortat has or the ability with his back to the basket. The combination of Gortat and Mahinmi, if they were one player, would be pretty good. . . . [New coach] Scott Brooks needs to do a lot of the same things he did in Oklahoma City: change the culture, implement a system. Brooks is a proven winner. Granted, he had good talent, but he did win with it.

NED DUSHMAN/NEAL/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | A capable roster with a winning coach makes the Wiz a compelling group in the East.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up New York

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH JEFF HORNACEK

(1st season with Knicks)

2015-16 RECORD 32-50

(3rd in Atlantic)

PG DERRICK ROSE*

16.4 PPG; 4.7 APG; 42.7 FG%; 29.3 3FG%

SG COURTNEY LEE*

9.6 PPG; 2.6 RPG; 45.4 FG%; 37.8 3FG%

SF CARMELO ANTHONY

21.8 PPG; 7.7 RPG; 43.4 FG%; 33.9 3FG%

PF KRISTAPS PORZINGIS

14.3 PPG; 7.3 RPG; 42.1 FG%; 33.3 3FG%

C JOAKIM NOAH*

4.3 PPG; 8.8 RPG; 3.8 APG; 38.3 FG%

BENCH

PG BRANDON JENNINGS*

6.9 PPG; 3.5 APG; 36.8 FG%; 32.9 3FG%

SF LANCE THOMAS

8.2 PPG; 2.2 RPG; 44.2 FG%; 40.4 3FG%

C KYLE O'QUINN

4.8 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 0.8 BPG; 47.6 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Knicks

TELLING NUMBER

-4.27

By most measures, Derrick Rose was one of the worst players at his position last season.

Rose's -4.27 real plus-minus ranked 74th of 77 qualifying point guards

(meaning that his play cost the Bulls 4.27 points per 100 possessions

last year). He was especially bad at the defensive end, which is troubling for the Knicks, whose anchor—an aging, oft-injured Joakim Noah—will need all the help he can get.

Offensively, Rose was a detriment too, but he had an uptick in efficiency in the

second half as he recovered from vision problems. If that emboldens him to gun more, New York—which will also put Carmelo Anthony in a fair number of isos—could be looking at a lot of empty possessions this season. All of which raises the question: Will Kristaps Porzingis get the ball enough?

The 7' 3" forward from Latvia was a revelation last season, stretching

the floor, dunking, blocking shots and offering a real ray of hope at Madison Square Garden. But the Knicks are holding on to playoff pipe dreams instead of committing to a rebuild. How do Rose and Noah (and an aging Melo) help Porzingis? They don't. At least Rose's contract lasts only one more season; Noah is locked in for four years and \$72 million. —R.N.

If they stay healthy, they could win 48 or 50 games. That's a big *if*. **Carmelo Anthony** has had knee issues. **Joakim Noah** has had injuries in the last couple of years. And with **Derrick Rose**, there's always the possibility he'll go down too. . . . Everyone talks about Noah and Rose, but **Courtney Lee** was a big pickup. He's a lockdown defender and a better three-point shooter than people think. . . . [New coach] Jeff Hornacek was a good choice. New York isn't an easy place to go. You're strapped with what Phil Jackson wants to do. But Hornacek is his own person. He'll play some triangle, but he'll also do other things—spreading the floor, pick-and-roll, trying to create more possessions. It's hard to win when you have only 80 or 90 possessions. The triangle is just too methodical . . . **Kristaps Porzingis** will eventually be one of the best players in the league. He can stretch the defense on pick-and-pops, which is hard to guard when you have a guy that's 7' 3" and can shoot like he can shoot. . . . Rose is still as quick as John Wall, he can make everyone around him better and he's not a bad perimeter shooter, but he needs to change the way he plays. He tries to challenge bigs, and as a result he gets knocked down and hurt. He needs to play a little smarter . . . Melo can flat-out score. He'll take bad shots sometimes, but he can defend when he wants to, and he can rebound. He's got help now. His priority should be winning—not scoring titles. . . . You might be able to squeeze out a decent eight-man rotation, but if guys get injured and others have to step up, then they really start to drop off.



BOTTOM LINE | This could have been the best team in the NBA—in 2010-11.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Milwaukee

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH JASON KIDD

(3rd season with Bucks)

2015-16 RECORD 33-49

(5th in Central)

PG MATTHEW DELLAVEDOVA*

7.5 PPG; 4.4 APG; 40.5 FG%; 41.0 3FG%

SG RASHAD VAUGHN

3.1 PPG; 1.3 RPG; 30.5 FG%; 29.3 3FG%

SF GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO

16.9 PPG; 7.7 RPG; 4.3 APG; 50.6 FG%

PF JABARI PARKER

14.1 PPG; 5.2 RPG; 0.9 SPG; 49.3 FG%

C GREG MONROE

15.3 PPG; 8.8 RPG; 0.8 BPG; 52.2 FG%

BENCH

PF MIRZA TELETOVIC*

12.2 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 42.7 FG%; 39.3 3FG%

SF TONY SNELL*

5.3 PPG; 3.1 RPG; 37.2 FG%; 36.1 3FG%

SG KHRIS MIDDLETON*

18.2 PPG; 4.2 APG; 44.4 FG%; 39.6 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION *INJURED, EXPECTED TO MISS SIGNIFICANT TIME

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Bucks

TELLING NUMBER

18.9

Giannis Antetokounmpo was the talk of the NBA after the All-Star break. That's when Jason Kidd moved him to point guard, where at 6' 11", he averaged 18.8 points, 8.6 rebounds, 7.2 assists and 1.9 blocks. (In September he signed a four-year,

\$100 million deal.)

But if the Greek Freak is officially the team's cornerstone, then 2014 No. 2 pick Jabari Parker showed he is a substantial building block. As he recovered from a left-ACL injury that cut his rookie season short, the 6' 8" forward

also blossomed after the All-Star break: **Parker lifted his average from 11.3 points to 18.9**, giving Milwaukee a true offensive threat on the wing.

Parker's scoring spiked as his stroke became more reliable. As he continues to build his game out to the perimeter, he can become an übersmooth throwback scorer next to the Bucks' futuristic

point forward.

Milwaukee will struggle without the shooting of Khris Middleton, who is out until at least the All-Star break with a torn left hamstring. (The trade of Michael Carter-Williams to Chicago for Tony Snell should help.) Antetokounmpo will undoubtedly be a star. If Parker can grow alongside him, it won't matter that the present is complicated. The future is bright. —A.S.

It is very unfortunate for them that **Khris Middleton** got hurt [out at least five months with a torn left hamstring]. I don't know if he's as good as some of the advanced metrics rate him, but what is clear is that the Bucks are terrible when he's not on the floor—nowhere near a competent NBA team. . . . Hot take for you: **Giannis Antetokounmpo** is going to average, like, 19 points, eight rebounds and seven assists, and make the All-Star Game. And the team's gonna stink. . . . **Jabari Parker** can't shoot threes, and neither can Giannis, and it's really hard to play with more than two guys who can't. So, if they're gonna play Giannis and Jabari, they should use **Mirza Teletovic** as a de facto center, since he can shoot threes, and he's kind of strong. . . . But it'll be hard for them to do that lineup because they have, literally, \$40 million per season tied up in [centers] **Greg Monroe**, **Miles Plumlee** and **John Henson**. . . . If you don't have enough shooting, it's really hard to be good on offense in the modern NBA. Especially in the half-court. If you do a good job pushing the ball and getting out and running, you can score in transition. Maybe they'll be able to do that with Giannis, which will make up for some of their issues. . . . [First-round pick] **Thon Maker** plays really hard, he's pretty mobile, but he has very little feel for the game and poor strength. He can't make shots at game speed yet. I hope they're not expecting him to play. . . . It's hard to figure out how the team makes sense as currently constructed. Jason Kidd's had a lot of influence in personnel moves, and I don't think that's been a good thing.

JOE MURPHY/NEAL/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | A return to the playoffs is likely a year away. But what a fun year it will be.



**FREAK
UNLEASHED**

After taking over the offense, Antetokounmpo broke out with five triple doubles in the Bucks' last 25 games.

Photograph by
Doug Pensinger
Getty Images



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Chicago

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH FRED HOIBERG

(2nd season with Bulls)

2015-16 RECORD 42-40

(4th in Central)

PG RAJON RONDO*

11.9 PPG; 11.7 APG; 45.4 FG%; 36.5 3FG%

SG DWYANE WADE*

19.0 PPG; 4.6 APG; 4.1 RPG; 45.6 FG%

SF JIMMY BUTLER

20.9 PPG; 5.3 RPG; 45.4 FG%; 31.2 3FG%

PF TAJ GIBSON

8.6 PPG; 6.9 RPG; 1.1 BPG; 52.6 FG%

C ROBIN LOPEZ*

10.3 PPG; 7.3 RPG; 1.6 BPG; 53.9 FG%

BENCH

PF NIKOLA MIROTIC

11.8 PPG; 5.5 RPG; 40.7 FG%; 39.0 3FG%

SF DOUG MCDERMOTT

9.4 PPG; 2.4 RPG; 45.2 FG%; 42.5 3FG%

PG MICHAEL CARTER-WILLIAMS*

11.5 PPG; 5.2 APG; 5.1 RPG; 45.2 FG%

*New acquisition

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Bulls

TELLING NUMBER

44.5%

They have bigger names than Nikola Mirotic. Dwyane Wade is a future Hall of Famer, Jimmy Butler is a perennial All-Star, and Rajon Rondo is one of the most perplexing NBA stars of the past decade. Throwing those three into the same backcourt mix may lead to wildly

divergent results from night to night.

Will the stars work together? Can anyone shoot? Will second-year coach Fred Hoiberg have a breakdown by February? All relevant questions that have been asked since July in Chicago.

But for this year and beyond, the

player who holds the key to those answers is the 6'10" Mirotic, a third-year forward.

His shooting ability creates space on the floor, which the Bulls will badly need. The only uncertainty is the consistency with which he connects. After an uneven rookie year in which he made 31.6% of his three-pointers but showed promise, he was supposed to be a breakout

star last season. Mirotic proceeded to shoot just 30.4% from deep in November and December. But in March and April, Mirotic improved his accuracy to 44.5%. It was like watching two different players. If Mirotic can be closer to that second version, it will help the offense breathe—and make the Bulls much scarier this winter than they looked this summer. —A.S.



I feel really bad for [second-year coach] Fred Hoiberg. He's a great guy. He left Iowa State; he was the Mayor. And now he's gotta coach this debacle. . . . Even when he was coaching in college, I didn't get the sense that he was seeing the game at an elite level, reacting and adjusting the way that Brad Stevens or Rick Carlisle does. I'm not sure he has that skill. But I do think he's got a good idea of how he wants to play and how to find an identity for his teams. . . . They're not gonna be horrible, but their three key guys—**Dwyane Wade**, **Rajon Rondo** and **Jimmy Butler**—prefer not to shoot off the catch. They like to dribble, they like to hold the ball, stop the ball. It's going to be hard to coax ball movement. Once they start taking some L's, I think they're gonna bump heads a little bit. . . . Butler sees himself as a star. He wants the ball in iso, which is O.K. if he's the go-to creator. But I do think a good coach would get him to consider catching the ball on the move more. Butler's very effective at what he does, he still defends most nights, but he's not a good fit with this team. . . . Rondo and Wade are very undisciplined defensively. They gamble a lot. They take shortcuts. . . . **Nikola Mirotic** is one saving grace. He takes some weird shots, but he can shoot, he can pass. They need him to play a lot of minutes alongside those other guys to give them enough space to operate. . . . **Bobby Portis** will be a good player, but he's pretty lost right now. Arkansas plays really unstructured basketball, so he didn't get a lot of understanding of NBA offensive or defensive concepts.

FERNANDO MEDINA/NEAL/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | They took big risks, but there's a chance those bets pay off better than expected.



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PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH ERIK SPOELSTRA
(9th season with Heat)

2015-16 RECORD 48-34
(1st in Southeast)

PG GORAN DRAGIC
14.1 PPG; 5.8 APG; 3.8 RPG; 47.7 FG%

SG JOSH RICHARDSON
6.6 PPG; 1.4 APG; 45.2 FG%; 46.1 3FG%

SF JUSTISE WINSLOW
6.4 PPG; 5.2 RPG; 1.5 APG; 42.2 FG%

PF DERRICK WILLIAMS*
9.3 PPG; 3.7 RPG; 45.0 FG%; 29.3 3FG%

C HASSAN WHITESIDE →
14.2 PPG; 11.8 RPG; 3.7 BPG; 60.6 FG%

BENCH

SG DION WAITERS*
9.8 PPG; 2.0 APG; 39.9 FG%; 35.8 3FG%

SG TYLER JOHNSON
8.7 PPG; 2.2 APG; 48.6 FG%; 38.0 3FG%

SF LUKE BABBITT*
7.0 PPG; 3.1 RPG; 42.2 FG%; 40.4 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Heat

TELLING NUMBER

1

LeBron James returned home, Dwyane Wade left his adopted city, and Chris Bosh found himself effectively barred from the team he thought had become his. So ends the Big Three era in Miami—one of the glitziest intersections of talent in NBA

history. **Only one player from the Heat's two title teams is likely to play for them this season:**

deep reserve Udonis Haslem. Everything in the league changes; almost everyone moves on. Bosh's departure, though, is particularly sad and cruel. Because

of blood clots that have put the remainder of his career in serious jeopardy, Miami effectively cut ties with the 11-time All-Star big man. (He believes he can still play and says he intends to.) That this came so soon after Wade's surprising exit for Chicago has thrust the Heat into a sudden transition. Their fate now precariously lies with Goran Dragic, Hassan

Whiteside and Justise Winslow—none of whom is a particularly convincing franchise player.

Of that trio, the 27-year-old Whiteside is the most capable—and the most unpredictable. Relying on such a player is dangerous given how the roster has been stripped down—not only of its talent, but also its leadership and experience. —R.M.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Miami

They got hit pretty hard with [the loss of] Chris Bosh [to blood clots] and Dwyane Wade [to the Bulls]. They do have, I think, one of the best coaches in Erik Spoelstra. He'll keep them focused and playing really good defense. But can they score enough? I don't think so. . . . Their two primary options are **Goran Dragic** and **Hassan Whiteside**. Talentwise, Dragic is as good as there is in the division. He's got great size, he can shoot from the outside, he can take it to the rim. He's got to have a breakout season for them to even be competitive. . . . A big part of Whiteside's success has come from his attitude. He was looking for a contract. He got it and did all the right things. He's pretty good with his back to the basket, and he's just gonna keep getting better offensively. . . . I'm not real high on **Justise Winslow**. His only strength is taking it to the basket, and then transition. He's not a good shooter at all. He lacks confidence, he lacks technique, he lacks a lot of things. . . . Their roster is so thin. **Udonis Haslem** is more of a cheerleader now. **Derrick Williams**—*ehhh*, I don't really care. **Josh McRoberts** can spread the floor, make threes and he's a smart player. But he's a backup who'll be pushed into Bosh's role. . . . Unless they can run and get a lot of possessions, they won't score very much. **Dion Waiters** can score. I think he's just too inconsistent. . . . **Josh Richardson** was a great pickup. He can play the one or the two, he's got size [6' 6"], he's athletic. He and **Tyler Johnson** are two-way players. Both will be on the floor for them a lot.

MIKE LAWRIE/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | Their first post-LeBron team won 37 games—a total the post-Wade-and-Bosh squad would welcome.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Orlando

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH FRANK VOGEL

(1st season with Magic)

2015-16 RECORD 35-47

(5th in Southeast)

PG ELFRID PAYTON

10.7 PPG; 6.4 APG; 43.6 FG%; 32.6 3FG%

SG EVAN FOURNIER

15.4 PPG; 2.7 APG; 46.2 FG%; 40.0 3FG%

SF AARON GORDON

9.2 PPG; 6.5 RPG; 1.6 APG; 47.3 FG%

PF SERGE IBAKA*

12.6 PPG; 6.8 RPG; 1.9 BPG; 47.9 FG%

C NIKOLA VUCEVIC

18.2 PPG; 8.9 RPG; 1.1 BPG; 51.0 FG%

BENCH

PG D.J. AUGUSTIN*

7.5 PPG; 3.2 APG; 42.3 FG%; 40.5 3FG%

C BISMACK BIYOMBO*

5.5 PPG; 8.0 APG; 1.6 BPG; 54.2 FG%

SF MARIO HEZONJA

6.1 PPG; 2.2 RPG; 43.3 FG%; 34.9 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Magic

TELLING NUMBER

\$72 MILLION

A center, Nikola Vucevic, led Orlando in usage and scoring last season. So naturally the Magic made a **\$72 million investment in another center, Bismack Biyombo**, who seems incapable of playing alongside him. Vucevic, 25, brings a varied scoring

arsenal; Biyombo, 24, is an impressive rebounder and shot blocker whose scoring is negligible. But neither is comfortable defending on the perimeter, and the place Biyombo needs to be on offense—near the rim—is also where Vucevic is

most effective.

New coach Frank Vogel will have to toggle between those two, which may not be the biggest frontcourt quandary presented by a muddled roster. The arrivals of Serge Ibaka from Oklahoma City and Jeff Green in free agency will leave little room for Aaron Gordon at power forward, forcing the athletic but offensively limited

21-year-old to play out of position at the three.

Just about any lineup Vogel could field would come up short in its spacing, defense or capacity to create. He at least has this option: Go for extended stretches with Biyombo and Ibaka, who can be twin pillars of a stout defense that might help the Magic finally claim some sort of lasting identity. —R.M.

I didn't like the deal for **Serge Ibaka**. Trading [guard] Victor Oladipo [to the Thunder] for Ibaka is kind of a wash, but they also gave up the 12th pick, and they're really only renting Ibaka. If he doesn't have a great year, they'll either overpay to keep him or just let him walk. . . . Some of the changes they made are a little frontcourt heavy even though they lack backcourt strength. How do you find minutes for all these guys: Ibaka, **Bismack Biyombo**, **Aaron Gordon**, **Nikola Vucevic**, **Jeff Green**? . . . Gordon will probably have to play the three because of the logjam. He's a great athlete and he's gonna get a lot of buckets in transition. He's strong and has great size to guard threes. But he lacks the shooting skill to space the floor. I like him more as a four. . . . When they need offense they'll go with Vucevic; when they need defense and rebounding they'll go with Biyombo. They paid Biyombo a lot of money, but he really has no offense at all. He came off that great playoff series where he was getting 20 rebounds a game and playing great defense. If he can repeat that kind of performance, he'll maybe even win the starting position. Frank Vogel is more of a defensive coach. . . . You get scoring from Vucevic, though, and I don't know how much of that they'll get from other positions. . . . **Elfrid Payton** has been a real disappointment. I don't think he has ever really improved. He's obviously an up-tempo, penetrating guard, but he can't shoot at all. . . . **Mario Hezonja** is really limited. Certainly he can give you spot-up shooting, but he's slow defensively.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Philadelphia

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH BRETT BROWN

(4th season with 76ers)

2015-16 RECORD 10-72

(5th in Atlantic)

PG JERRYD BAYLESS*

10.4 PPG; 3.1 APG; 42.3 FG%; 43.7 3FG%

SG GERALD HENDERSON*

8.7 PPG; 2.9 RPG; 43.9 FG%; 35.3 3FG%

SF ROBERT COVINGTON

12.8 PPG; 6.3 RPG; 38.5 FG%; 35.3 3FG%

PF DARIO ŠARIĆ (R)

11.7 PPG; 5.8 RPG; 50.0 FG%; 40.3 3FG%

C JOEL EMBIID (R)*

11.2 PPG; 8.1 RPG; 1.4 APG; 62.6 FG%



BENCH

C JAHLIL OKAFOR

17.5 PPG; 7.0 RPG; 1.2 BPG; 50.8 FG%

SF JERAMI GRANT

9.7 PPG; 4.7 RPG; 1.6 BPG; 41.9 FG%

PF NERLENS NOEL

11.1 PPG; 8.1 RPG; 1.8 SPG; 52.1 FG%

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE, EUROPEAN STATS (R) ROOKIE, 2013-14 COLLEGE STATS

EASTERN CONFERENCE

76ers

TELLING NUMBER

948

Joel Embiid finally arrived. The No. 3 pick of the 2014 draft suited up for the 76ers on Oct. 4, **Embiid's first basketball game in 948 days, since he was at Kansas.** Not only did the 7-foot Embiid play, but he also played well, showing that his skills didn't

erode while he was sidelined with foot injuries. But just as Embiid came back, another young star exited in Philadelphia: Top pick Ben Simmons suffered a Jones fracture in his right foot and isn't likely to see the court for several months.

As welcome as Embiid's return

is, it does create one problem: Even with Simmons out, Philadelphia has a glut of highly touted (and highly drafted) big men. Nerlens Noel, 22, is a defensive presence off the bench, but his lack of shooting should rule him out as a power forward. Jahlil Okafor, 21, is a poor defender but an elite low-post scorer, which might make him the most likely big man to be moved. And rookie Dario Šarić,

22, has shown the potential to be a solid stretch four.

Before making a move, the Sixers can allow coach Brett Brown to try different frontcourt combinations in what will no doubt be another losing season. But if the 22-year-old Embiid stays healthy—and continues to flash the talent that made him such an exciting prospect—they can call 2016-17 a qualified success. —R.N.



I think they want to start **Jahlil Okafor** at power forward and **Nerlens Noel** at center, but it's not gonna work. Okafor has to have the block; he's as good a low-post scorer as there is in the league, but his defense is a glaring flaw. Noel can't shoot, so his [baskets] are going to come around the rim. It's going to be a hard, hard match to make work. . . . **Joel Embiid** is such an unknown too. Everybody says he's really good, but he's had two foot injuries, and what's to say he's not going to have another one? I have to believe that in the first third of the season, they trade one of their three bigs. It will probably be Noel. He can defend but he's really light in the ass—very thin. Maybe it's to Boston for a wing player. Philadelphia is just so bad in the backcourt. . . . Another thing: If **Dario Šarić** is as good as they say he is as a stretch big, he's gonna need minutes, too. . . . Obviously **Ben Simmons** is going to be a star once he recovers from his [right] foot injury. He's got guard skills and his vision is incredible for his size [6' 10"]. He's a great passer, not a very good shooter. He will guard the threes and will do a lot of three stuff, but I can see them playing him at point guard to hide his lack of scoring. . . . There are mostly stopgaps on the perimeter. **Gerald Henderson** improves their backcourt, but he's not long-term. **Jerryd Bayless** will probably start but he's not long-term. **Sergio Rodriguez** has never had much success in the NBA. **T.J. McConnell**, I don't like at all. **Nik Stauskas** has done nothing since he came into the league.

JESSED GARRABANT/NEAL/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | Process this: The engaging Sixers are no longer the worst team in the league.

I am very Sensitive to Lights and Sounds

Jacob Sanchez
Diagnosed with autism

Sensory sensitivity is a sign of autism.
Learn the others at autismspeaks.org/signs.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Brooklyn

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH KENNY ATKINSON

(1st season with Nets)

2015-16 RECORD 21-61

(4th in Atlantic)

PG JEREMY LIN*

11.7 PPG; 3.0 APG; 41.2 FG%; 33.6 3FG%

SG RONDAE HOLLIS-JEFFERSON

5.8 PPG; 5.3 RPG; 1.3 SPG; 45.7 FG%

SF BOJAN BOGDANOVIC

11.2 PPG; 3.2 RPG; 43.3 FG%; 38.2 3FG%

PF TREVOR BOOKER*

5.9 PPG; 5.7 RPG; 1.1 APG; 49.0 FG%

C BROOK LOPEZ

20.6 PPG; 7.8 APG; 1.7 BPG; 51.1 FG%

BENCH

SF SEAN KILPATRICK

11.1 PPG; 1.8 RPG; 45.6 FG%; 34.2 3FG%

PF LUIS SCOLA*

8.7 PPG; 4.7 RPG; 45.0 FG%; 40.4 3FG%

PG GREIVIS VASQUEZ*

5.7 PPG; 4.0 APG; 32.6 FG%; 24.7 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Nets

TELLING NUMBER

\$124.8

MILLION

They signed shooting guards Tyler Johnson and Allen Crabbe to **offer sheets worth \$124.8 million this summer.** They ended up actually spending \$0 on the pair after the Heat and the Blazers, respectively, matched the deals. This is the daunting

task for the Nets' new general manager, Sean Marks: He must rebuild a lottery-bound team with no lottery picks. (The Nets don't control their top pick until 2019.) So he went the free-agent route, had to overbid for two unproven players—and still couldn't

reel them in.

Marks is paying for the mistakes of previous regimes, and he's staring at perhaps the most difficult rebuild in NBA history. With Johnson and Crabbe, the Nets were looking to assemble a young, athletic team that could make some noise from the perimeter. Instead, Marks focused on bringing in veterans, including Jeremy Lin and Randy

Foye, on small and sensible deals. Lin, who will start at point guard, had a solid season for the Hornets and showed improvement defensively.

Marks, 41, cut his teeth in the Spurs' front office and is the right person to lead the long climb back to relevance. But he learned a hard lesson this summer: Money alone can't begin to fix Brooklyn's problems. —R.N.



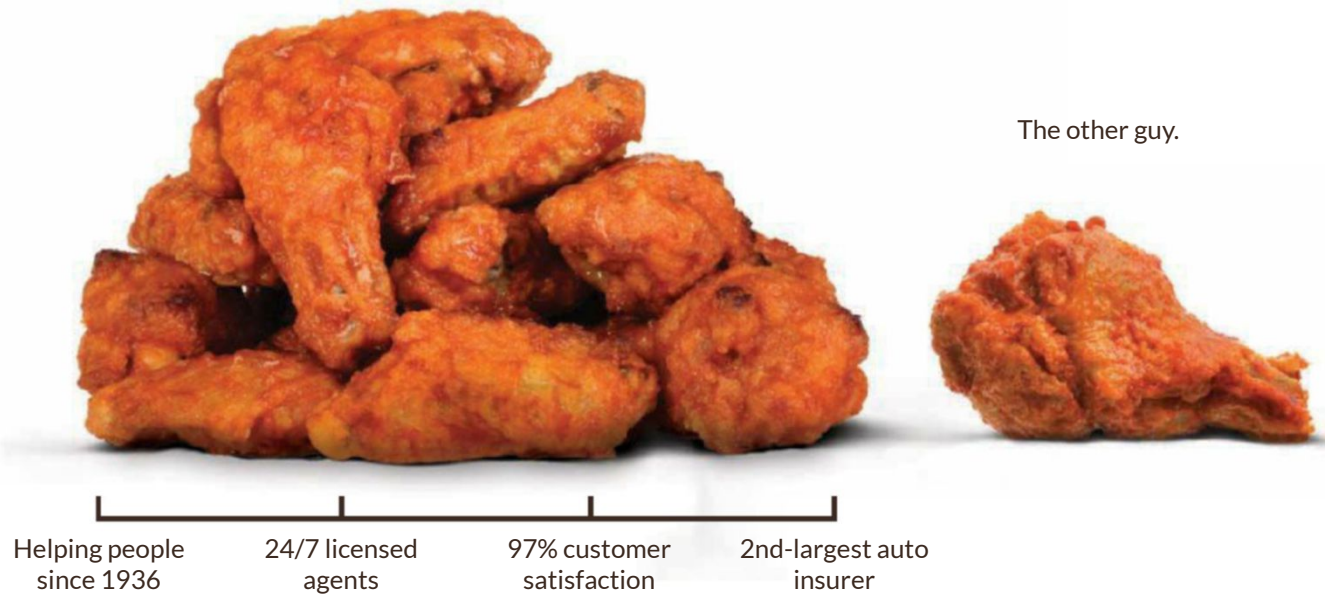
They're years away from being competitive. No real, valuable draft picks until 2019. You've just gotta break it down, rebuild, and own it: *We're the worst team in the NBA.* . . . **Trevor Booker** was a good pickup. He played well in Utah—good defender, good rebounder, not a bad scorer. . . . **Jeremy Lin** had a strong year for the Hornets. He's basically going to keep the ship afloat if he can. He's not a great point guard because he doesn't have the ballhandling skills. But he's a good all-around player and a good fit for a bad team because he'll be able to score and he can make them a little bit competitive. . . . **Luis Scola** is old. **Chris McCullough**—not a whole lot to work with. You'll see an entirely different team when they do take that next step. . . . They've basically given everyone away, and I think **Brook Lopez** might be the next to go. He would be a good pickup for any team. He can flat-out pick-and-pop and make a shot, and he's big enough to score inside. He's capable of double doubles every night and can get you 30. He's by far their best player. . . . **Rondae Hollis-Jefferson** is a typical small, athletic forward who can run the floor. Wing defenders are so important in the game today. But I don't know how well he shoots. . . . [New GM] Sean Marks has come in and made massive changes. I think Kenny Atkinson was a good choice as coach. He worked for Mike Budenholzer, and I think he'll bring in that kind of a system—run up and down, defend, play small. He worked in New York under Mike D'Antoni and would certainly have learned offensive spacing from him.

ERICK W. RASCO



BOTTOM LINE | The new regime inherits a tough job. How tough? These guys are worse than the *Knicks*.

GEICO.



The choice is yours, and it's simple.

Why enjoy just one chicken wing when there's a whole plate in front of you?

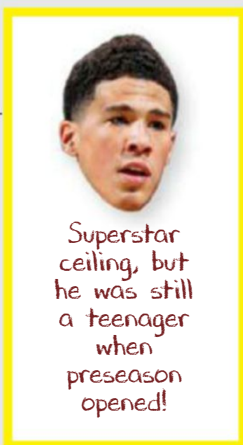
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Superstar ceiling, but he was still a teenager when preseason opened!

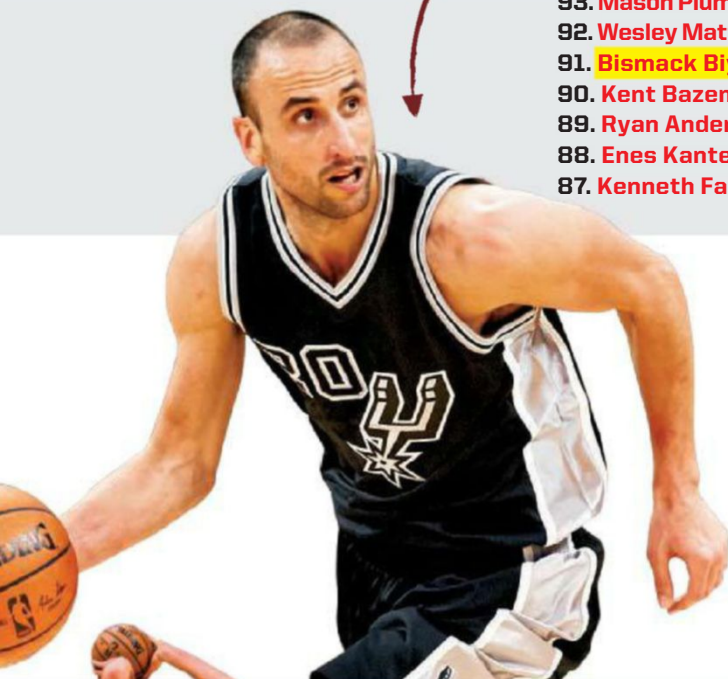
Blame Rob. He always stumps for the ultimate floor-spacer.

Magic paid him \$72 million: 71 for his defense, one for his offense.



One of many defensively challenged low-post scorers to fall this year.

Still a magician at 39. The oldest player on the list.



- 100. **Devin Booker**, Suns (NR)
- 99. **Aaron Gordon**, Magic (NR)
- 98. **Brandon Knight**, Suns (79)
- 97. **Manu Ginobili**, Spurs (NR)
- 96. **J.R. Smith**, Cavaliers (NR)
- 95. **Evan Fournier**, Magic (NR)
- 94. **Cody Zeller**, Hornets (NR)
- 93. **Mason Plumlee**, Trail Blazers (NR)
- 92. **Wesley Matthews**, Mavericks (99)
- 91. **Bismack Biyombo**, Magic (NR)
- 90. **Kent Bazemore**, Hawks (NR)
- 89. **Ryan Anderson**, Rockets (72)
- 88. **Enes Kanter**, Thunder (NR)
- 87. **Kenneth Faried**, Nuggets (86)

- 75. **Nikola Vučević**, Magic (67)
- 74. **Victor Oladipo**, Thunder (NR)
- 73. **DeMarre Carroll**, Raptors (81)
- 72. **Avery Bradley**, Celtics (NR)
- 71. **Ricky Rubio**, T-Wolves (87)
- 70. **Kyle Korver**, Hawks (46)
- 69. **Danny Green**, Spurs (50)
- 68. **Kristaps Porzingis**, Knicks (NR)
- 67. **Andrew Wiggins**, T-Wolves (91)
- 66. **Thaddeus Young**, Pacers (75)
- 65. **Marvin Williams**, Hornets (NR)
- 64. **Zach Randolph**, Grizzlies (49)
- 63. **Greg Monroe**, Bucks (48)
- 62. **Jonas Valanciunas**, Raptors (77)

The Big Apple's most beloved is a lock to make a big jump next year.

SI's Top

In September **Ben Golliver** and **Rob Mahon** (much to the chagrin of DeMar DeRozan). Now

Knee injury makes repeating career year difficult.



A favorite of diehards and rival coaches alike.

The best young player you've (probably) never heard of.

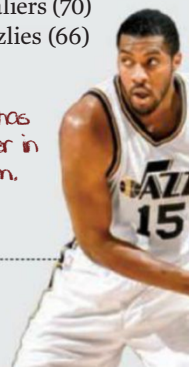
- 86. **Amir Johnson**, Celtics (89)
- 85. **Rodney Hood**, Jazz (NR)
- 84. **Nerlens Noel**, 76ers (97)
- 83. **Andrew Bogut**, Mavericks (76)
- 82. **Robin Lopez**, Bulls (84)
- 81. **Trevor Ariza**, Rockets (65)
- 80. **Rudy Gay**, Kings (52)
- 79. **Clint Capela**, Rockets (NR)
- 78. **Nikola Jokić**, Nuggets (NR)
- 77. **Tobias Harris**, Pistons (78)
- 76. **Ian Mahinmi**, Wizards (NR)

- 61. **Goran Dragic**, Heat (42)
- 60. **Luol Deng**, Lakers (56)
- 59. **J.J. Redick**, Clippers (93)
- 58. **Bradley Beal**, Wizards (62)
- 57. **Jeff Teague**, Pacers (41)
- 56. **George Hill**, Jazz (80)
- 55. **Marcin Gortat**, Wizards (63)
- 54. **Reggie Jackson**, Pistons (94)
- 53. **Jae Crowder**, Celtics (NR)
- 52. **Tristan Thompson**, Cavaliers (70)
- 51. **Chandler Parsons**, Grizzlies (66)

The only Laker to make the list now that Kobe is retired.

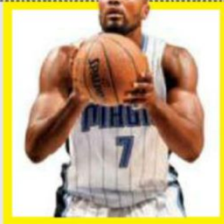


Ben probably has a favors poster in his bedroom.



Saw his ranking; called us "stupid."

Took a hit after a rough season that led to trade.



This one incited fan outrage, but his defense was damaging.

This year's his best debut, and his better than Anthony Davis's 2014 debut.

- 50. **CJ McCollum**, Trail Blazers (NR)
- 49. **Eric Bledsoe**, Suns (33)
- 48. **Giannis Antetokounmpo**, Bucks (100)
- 47. **Danilo Gallinari**, Nuggets (73)
- 46. **DeMar DeRozan**, Raptors (61)
- 45. **Isaiah Thomas**, Celtics (88)
- 44. **Andre Iguodala**, Warriors (44)
- 43. **Nicolas Batum**, Hornets (55)
- 42. **Serge Ibaka**, Magic (25)
- 41. **Pau Gasol**, Spurs (40)
- 40. **Steven Adams**, Thunder (NR)
- 39. **Khris Middleton**, Bucks (45)
- 38. **Brook Lopez**, Nets (38)
- 37. **Chris Bosh**, Heat (22)

- 25. **Kyrie Irving**, Cavaliers (23)
- 24. **Carmelo Anthony**, Knicks (15)
- 23. **Karl-Anthony Towns**, T-Wolves (NR)
- 22. **Marc Gasol**, Grizzlies (9)
- 21. **Damian Lillard**, Trail Blazers (24)
- 20. **DeAndre Jordan**, Clippers (29)
- 19. **Klay Thompson**, Warriors (26)
- 18. **Al Horford**, Celtics (21)
- 17. **John Wall**, Wizards (13)
- 16. **Jimmy Butler**, Bulls (18)
- 15. **Paul Millsap**, Hawks (32)
- 14. **Kyle Lowry**, Raptors (34)
- 13. **Draymond Green**, Warriors (16)
- 12. **DeMarcus Cousins**, Kings (14)

That's right: four Warriors in the top 20.

Failed his physical after list came out. Should Heat tank?

Top 10 talent; HR nightmare.

Top 100



(Last year's ranking)

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (DENG); JUAN OCAMPO/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (JOKIC, PAUL); GREG NELSON (GINOBILI); ROCKY WIDNER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (BOOKER); GARY DINEEN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (MONROE); FERNANDO MEDINA/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (IBAKA); ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES (GEORGE); MELISSA MAJCHRAZAK/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (FAVORS)

They set out to rank the Top 100 players in the NBA, as tip-off looms, they've reexamined and annotated the list

Will he be addition by subtraction for the Rockets?

- 36. **Kemba Walker**, Hornets (NR)
- 35. **Hassan Whiteside**, Heat (69)
- 34. **Dwight Howard**, Hawks (19)
- 33. **Rudy Gobert**, Jazz (39)
- 32. **Dwyane Wade**, Bulls (30)
- 31. **Dirk Nowitzki**, Mavericks (28)
- 30. **Kevin Love**, Cavaliers (17)
- 29. **Andre Drummond**, Pistons (35)
- 28. **Derrick Favors**, Jazz (37)
- 27. **Gordon Hayward**, Jazz (31)
- 26. **Mike Conley**, Grizzlies (27)

- 11. **LaMarcus Aldridge**, Spurs (12)
- 10. **Blake Griffin**, Clippers (8)
- 9. **Paul George**, Pacers (20)
- 8. **Anthony Davis**, Pelicans (3)
- 7. **James Harden**, Rockets (5)
- 6. **Kawhi Leonard**, Spurs (10)
- 5. **Russell Westbrook**, Thunder (7)
- 4. **Chris Paul**, Clippers (6)
- 3. **Steph Curry**, Warriors (4)
- 2. **Kevin Durant**, Warriors (2)
- 1. **LeBron James**, Cavaliers (1)

Barely edged out Westbrook thanks to defense, shot selection, control.

Jumped into top 10 after big bounce back from scary injury.



The King for the fourth straight year.

Is the unanimous MVP underrated?





ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Golden State

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH STEVE KERR

(3rd season with Warriors)

2015-16 RECORD 73-9

(1st in Pacific)

PG STEPH CURRY

30.1 PPG; 6.7 APG; 5.4 RPG; 45.4 3FG%

SG KLAY THOMPSON

22.1 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 47.0 FG%; 42.5 3FG%

SF KEVIN DURANT*

28.2 PPG; 8.2 RPG; 50.5 FG%; 38.7 3FG%

PF DRAYMOND GREEN

14.0 PPG; 9.5 RPG; 7.4 APG; 49.0 FG%

C ZAZA PACHULIA*

8.6 PPG; 9.4 RPG; 1.7 APG; 46.6 FG%

BENCH

SF ANDRE IGUODALA

7.0 PPG; 4.0 RPG; 3.4 APG; 47.8 FG%

PF DAVID WEST*

7.1 PPG; 4.0 RPG; 1.8 APG; 54.5 FG%

PG SHAUN LIVINGSTON

6.3 PPG; 3.0 APG; 2.2 RPG; 53.6 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Warriors

TELLING NUMBER

115.6

The 1986-87 Lakers, directed so brilliantly by Magic Johnson, have stood as the gold standard for devastating offense. But the **Showtime Lakers'** **115.6 offensive rating—a modern record—is in serious jeopardy** thanks to Kevin

Durant's arrival in the Bay Area. Last season Steph Curry guided the Warriors to a franchise-best 114.5 offensive rating, the 12th highest in the three-point era. Golden State's rating should only climb in 2016-17 now that Curry has been paired

with Durant to form the most potent duo since Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant. The Warriors' new supertandem has combined to win the last three MVP awards and five of the last seven scoring titles. Throw in Klay Thompson, and coach Steve Kerr has three legitimate 50/40/90 shooting candidates in his starting lineup. Durant shouldn't

be overly concerned about getting his touches. Under Kerr, Golden State has led the league in assist rate for the last two seasons—while the ball-stopping Thunder never ranked higher than 15th during Durant's nine seasons. "There's a lot I need to learn," Durant said this month. "I'm not as smart as I thought I was about the game. It's played a different way here." —B.G.

No way they beat 73 wins. They'll go through some growing pains in terms of figuring out the lineups and shot distribution. I could see them starting slow. They get one of the best players in **Kevin Durant** now, but they have to redefine everyone's role. . . . Durant is more of a ball-stopper than **Steph Curry** and **Klay Thompson**, but I think Steve Kerr will make it a priority to use that as a strength by giving him a package of isolation plays. They have the luxury of using Durant as a hammer: If he gets a good matchup or if they're coming out of timeouts, they can just force-feed him to put pressure on the defense. . . . I used to think Carmelo [Anthony] was the toughest one-on-one matchup, but Durant has taken that place. How do you guard him? Durant played high-level defense during the 2016 playoffs. He's such a good offensive player that it still gets overlooked, but he has game-changing ability on defense. . . . They took a big step back at center. Andrew Bogut is an elite defender, and Festus Ezeli was proven. They will have to adjust their defensive scheme with **Zaza Pachulia** and **Anderson Varejão**. . . . They'll miss Bogut more than anyone they lost. His injury in the Finals was one of the main reasons they fell apart. If he was a 10 on a 1-to-10 scale for rim protection, Zaza is a 3 or 4. But they can always close games with **Draymond Green** at the center, so it's not the end of the world. . . . Green is a top 15 talent. He's their best interior defender by a long shot now. But that small lineup is vulnerable on the glass, as both Cleveland and Oklahoma City showed.

NOAH GRAHAM/NEAL/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | Just a hunch: They won't struggle to score points. A second title in three years looks inevitable.

PIVOTAL PLAYER

The 6' 7" Green was again a defensive force in the paint, anchoring Golden State's small ball lineup and making his second consecutive All-Defensive first team.

Photograph by
Greg Nelson





ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up San Antonio

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH GREGG POPOVICH

(21st season with Spurs)

2015-16 RECORD 67-15

(1st in Southwest)

PG TONY PARKER

11.9 PPG; 5.3 APG; 49.3 FG%; 41.5 3FG%

SG DANNY GREEN

7.2 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 37.6 FG%; 33.2 3FG%

SF KAWHI LEONARD

21.2 PPG; 6.8 RPG; 50.6 FG%; 44.3 3FG%

PF LAMARCUS ALDRIDGE

18.0 PPG; 8.5 RPG; 1.1 BPG; 51.3 FG%

C PAU GASOL*

16.5 PPG; 11.0 RPG; 4.1 APG; 46.9 FG%



BENCH

SG MANU GINÓBILI

9.6 PPG; 3.1 APG; 45.3 FG%; 39.1 3FG%

PG PATTY MILLS

8.5 PPG; 2.8 APG; 42.5 FG%; 38.4 3FG%

PF DAVID LEE*

7.8 PPG; 5.5 RPG; 1.5 APG; 53.1 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Spurs

TELLING NUMBER

819

Two of Gregg Popovich's three most-used lineups last season included Tim Duncan. Though he was far from the high MVP-heights of his prime years—he averaged just 8.6 points per game—Duncan still provided willing ball movement and rock-solid back line

defense. **In their 819 minutes on the court, those Duncan-centric groups walloped their competition,**

with net ratings of 15.6 and 8.6.

So what will Popovich do with that time now that Duncan has retired? Free-agent pickup Pau Gasol figures to

get most of it, and though he's a capable scorer at 36, he's nowhere near the defender Duncan was. Gasol will shoot more than Duncan, which could take opportunities away from LaMarcus Aldridge, who saw his field goal attempts per game decline by nearly 30% in his first season as a Spur. Popovich also lost two versatile frontcourt options with

the departures of free agents David West and Boris Diaw.

The Spurs certainly still have elite talent in Aldridge and Kawhi Leonard, and they can finish near the top of the West. But unless Pop can effectively minimize Duncan's absence, they will lose the flexibility that made them a terror on both ends of the court for almost two decades. —R.N.



Kawhi Leonard is great. So you have a top 10 player, arguably top five. They'll be pretty successful as long as they have him. . . . **Pau Gasol** is probably the starting center. His pick-and-roll defense has been a disaster for years, but [coach Gregg Popovich] will get more out of him on that end than other teams did. That will be a challenge. Going from Tim Duncan's pick-and-roll defense to Pau's, that'll hurt. . . . I wouldn't be surprised if you see **Dewayne Dedmon** playing in key situations because he's so much better defensively than Pau. . . . They signed **David Lee**. Yikes. Yikes. . . . **Manu Ginóbili** is still playing, and I still like him a lot. [But at 39] he just can't do it anymore in the highest-intensity moments, against the best athletes. He doesn't have enough left. . . . **Tony Parker** is an above-average starter in the regular season, but he can't be the playmaker in the playoffs. . . . It's clearly Kawhi's team. They're going to run a lot of stuff for him, and he'll score a lot. Pick-and-rolls, isos, post-ups. **LaMarcus Aldridge** just needs to be the No. 2 guy and exploit bad matchups, make pick-and-pops and space them out with jump shots. It's not unrealistic to think that Aldridge is past his prime now [at 31]. That said, his game will age well. As a jump-shooting big with that height and that length, he'll be fine. . . . They'll be well-coached and well-managed, and Kawhi is great. But do I think they're a championship team with Kawhi as their best player and LaMarcus as their second-best? Without someone else emerging, probably not. Definitely not when the Warriors have the best team of all time.

B. SEVALD/SCHWEGLER/NEAL/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | No Duncan, no problem. Pop's 50-win streak will reach 18 seasons.

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH DOC RIVERS

(4th season with Clippers)

2015-16 RECORD 53-29

(2nd in Pacific)

PG CHRIS PAUL

19.5 PPG; 10.0 APG; 2.1 SPG; 46.2 FG%

SG J.J. REDICK

16.3 PPG; 1.4 APG; 48.0 FG%; 47.5 3FG%

SF LUC MBAH A MOUTE

3.1 PPG; 2.3 RPG; 0.6 SPG; 45.4 FG%

PF BLAKE GRIFFIN

21.4 PPG; 8.4 RPG; 4.9 APG; 49.9 FG%

C DEANDRE JORDAN

12.7 PPG; 13.8 RPG; 2.3 BPG; 70.3 FG%

BENCH

SG JAMAL CRAWFORD

14.2 PPG; 2.3 APG; 40.4 FG%; 34.0 3FG%

PG AUSTIN RIVERS

8.9 PPG; 1.5 APG; 43.8 FG%; 33.5 3FG%

PF BRANDON BASS*

7.2 PPG; 4.3 RPG; 0.8 BPG; 54.9 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Clippers

TELLING NUMBER

36

There was a time not long ago when Blake Griffin dunked with such regularity that the nightly highlight shows would have run out of time showing his best aerial assaults. In 2011-12, for example, Griffin threw down nearly three times per game, and dunks

accounted for more than 20% of his shot attempts.

Those days are over. The **world's most famous Kia hurdler had just 36 dunks last season** in his 35 games. (Griffin missed time with multiple injuries and for a four-game suspension after punching a

team employee.)

His dunk rate has actually declined for four straight seasons as his scoring opportunities have shifted to the perimeter. In '15-16, nearly 46% of his shots were long twos; even a mid-range maestro such as LaMarcus Aldridge has never devoted so many attempts to such shots. Although Griffin's move to the elbow has cut into his

efficiency and shooting numbers, the Clippers have compensated by increasing his role as a distributor and taking advantage of the extra space around the basket for DeAndre Jordan. The real hope, though, is that the perimeter approach will lead to less wear and tear, making for a healthier Griffin in the postseason—where he's never advanced past the second round. —B.G.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Los Angeles

The biggest question with them is always, Who are they in the playoffs? Something always goes wrong—they always crack when it matters. They're hoping that other teams will fall apart so they can have their day, but that's a tough strategy in the West. Good luck. . . . We've been spoiled by **Chris Paul's** greatness during the regular season, but how much of it has transferred to [success in] the playoffs? That's where he's at right now in his career and where they're at as a team. He's getting passed by some of these younger point guards. I'd rather have Steph Curry, Russell Westbrook or Damian Lillard. . . . Even during the regular season spot-up shooters like **J.J. Redick** work so hard to get a shot off. Now it's the playoffs, and you have extra time to scout their pet plays, better effort across the board defensively, and it's even harder for Redick to make a big impact. . . . If you take his health questions out of the mix, **Blake Griffin** is the best power forward right now, just ahead of LaMarcus Aldridge. He can shoot, he's a playmaker, he can handle the ball and make decisions. But Griffin has barely played since last Christmas. . . . **DeAndre Jordan** can be a championship center because he's so elite defensively. He keeps making incremental improvements offensively, and they tweaked the Hack-a-Shaq rule, which could help him. . . . **Luc Mbah a Moute** was a nice find. He gives some defensive balance to their first unit, and he doesn't need shots. They're one of the teams that can start two bigs. Playing Mbah a Moute with Jordan and Griffin gives them a lot of length and size.



BOTTOM LINE | Stop us if you've heard this before: They'll have a 50-win season and watch the Finals on TV.

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH TERRY STOTTS

(5th season with Trail Blazers)

2015-16 RECORD 44-38

(2nd in Northwest)

PG DAMIAN LILLARD

25.1 PPG; 6.8 APG; 41.9 FG%; 37.5 3FG%

SG CJ MCCOLLUM

20.8 PPG; 4.3 APG; 44.8 FG%; 41.7 3FG%

SF EVAN TURNER*

10.5 PPG; 4.9 RPG; 4.4 APG; 45.6 FG%

PF AL-FAROUC AMINU

10.2 PPG; 6.1 APG; 41.6 FG%; 36.1 3FG%

C MASON PLUMLEE

9.1 PPG; 7.7 RPG; 2.8 APG; 51.6 3FG%

BENCH

SG ALLEN CRABBE

10.3 PPG; 2.7 RPG; 45.9 FG%; 39.3 3FG%

PF MEYERS LEONARD

8.4 PPG; 5.1 RPG; 44.8 FG%; 37.7 3FG%

C ED DAVIS

6.5 PPG; 7.4 RPG; 0.9 BPG; 61.1 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Trail Blazers

TELLING NUMBER

131.3%

Compared with last season, when the team was one of the NBA's most pleasant surprises, **the Trail Blazers are paying 131.3% more in active contracts**, according to Spotrac. Over the summer Portland loosened the purse strings to retain Allen Crabbe (four

years, \$75 million), Meyers Leonard (four years, \$41 million) and Moe Harkless (four years, \$40 million). The Blazers also signed Evan Turner to a four-year, \$70 million deal. Those investments have pushed the active payroll, which was ranked 29th in the league

last year, into the top five.

Will that money buy a title contender? That's unclear. Retaining Crabbe and Harkless at least made sense in terms of continuity, but handing the hefty deal to Turner—who can't really shoot—could haunt Portland for years to come. And don't forget that CJ McCollum's four-year, \$106 million extension kicks in next season.

That further locks the Trail Blazers into this core.

There are certainly reasons to be optimistic. McCollum and Damian Lillard have proved themselves capable of shooting Portland to unexpected wins. But both have plenty of room to improve defensively. For now, the Blazers are paying premium bucks and are still a legit two-way star from serious contention. —R.N.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Portland

They'll be pretty similar to last year—a top seven offense and an average defense—and they'll be in position to get home court in the first round. People who assume they will take a step back because they had some good luck in the playoffs last year are making a mistake. . . . They've got everything you want on offense: spacing, shot creators, unselfish guys. They are one of the few teams that can hang in a shootout with Golden State. After this summer their depth is better than people think. . . . This team starts and ends with **Damian Lillard**. I think he's the best point guard in the league besides Stephen Curry and Russell Westbrook. He's good enough to will a team into the playoffs and to make some noise. . . . **CJ McCollum** is one of the best ballhandlers in the league. He's got a little Kyrie Irving in his game when it comes to his off-the-dribble moves. He can catch and shoot on threes, too, but he prefers to snipe and find his spots closer in, even though a lot of other guards have abandoned those midrange shots. . . . I don't understand the **Evan Turner** move, because now he's probably taking away possessions from either Lillard or McCollum. How they fit Turner in will be the biggest story line. . . . I would start **Allen Crabbe** over guys like Turner and **Moe Harkless**. His ability to space gets the most out of Lillard and McCollum. . . . I really liked how they started **Al-Farouq Aminu** as a small-ball four down the stretch. That was easily their best lineup. He's a defensive stopper who can shoot the three a little bit, although his form is terrible.

JOHN W. McDONOUGH



BOTTOM LINE | Until the D catches up with the O, Portland's ceiling won't get much higher.



BIG O

Lillard stepped up in big situations, averaging 31.8 points per game in Portland's second-round loss to Golden State.

Photograph by
John W. McDonough



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Oklahoma City

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH BILLY DONOVAN

(2nd season with Thunder)

2015-16 RECORD 55-27

(1st in Northwest)

PG RUSSELL WESTBROOK

23.5 PPG; 10.4 APG; 7.8 RPG; 45.4 FG%

SG VICTOR OLADIPO*

16.0 PPG; 4.8 RPG; 43.8 FG%; 34.8 3FG% →

SF ANDRE ROBERSON

4.8 PPG; 3.6 RPG; 49.6 FG%; 31.1 3FG%

PF ERSAN ILYASOVA*

10.4 PPG; 5.4 RPG; 42.4 FG%; 37.1 3FG%

C STEVEN ADAMS

8.0 PPG; 6.7 RPG; 1.1 BPG; 61.3 FG%

BENCH

SF KYLE SINGLER

3.4 PPG; 2.1 RPG; 38.9 FG%; 30.9 3FG%

C ENES KANTER

12.7 PPG; 8.1 RPG; 0.4 BPG; 57.9 FG%

PF DOMANTAS SABONIS (R)

17.6 PPG; 11.8 RPG; 1.8 APG; 61.1 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Thunder

TELLING NUMBER

39.0

With Kevin Durant off the floor last season, **Russell Westbrook's usage rate was an astronomical 39.0.** That would be the highest of all time if maintained for an entire season. And lest you think Westbrook can't keep that up, he finished the

2014-15 season, when Durant played in only 27 games, at 38.3. (The Thunder won 45 games but missed the playoffs.)

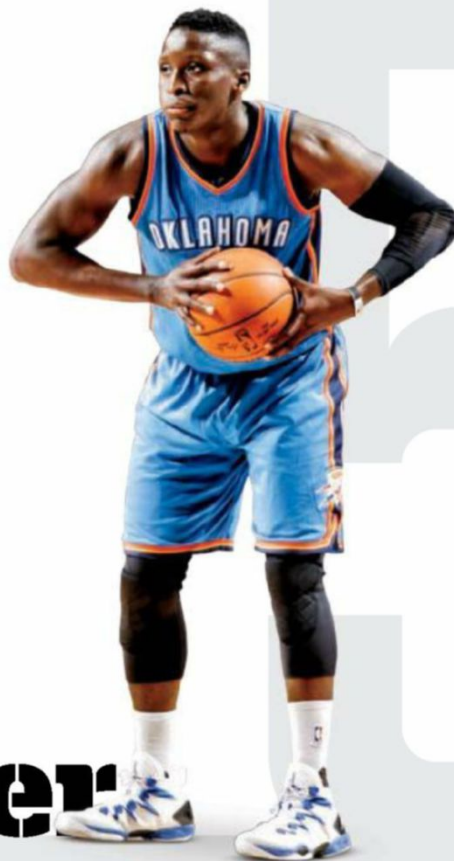
Plain and simple, this season in Oklahoma City will be The Russ Show, and coach Billy Donovan needs to balance unleashing his best player

with keeping the rest of the team involved. Letting Westbrook gun at full capacity would be a disservice to a roster that—ironically, in light of Durant's departure—has finally filled out nicely.

Victor Oladipo is an intriguing backcourtmate for Westbrook, and he should be a better fit in OKC than he was on a cramped Magic roster. Steven

Adams showed in the postseason that he's on his way to becoming one of the better centers in the NBA. And Enes Kanter has always had the offensive chops to hang in Western Conference shootouts.

The Thunder will go only as far as Westbrook takes them, but the higher his usage rate creeps, the more OKC risks diminishing returns. —R.N.



Kevin Durant's leaving ends their long reign as contenders. Even if **Russell Westbrook** is the MVP, it will be hard for them to crack the top four in the West because they'll have a bottom 10 defense. . . . For years their whole M.O. has been two guys doing everything and the rest of the team playing off them. Now it's going to be a much more collective approach. Westbrook won't allow them to fall apart. . . . Sometimes people view Westbrook as just an athlete, but he is savvy beating guys off the dribble, and he understands that putting pressure on the rim can make a lot of good things happen. He's probably the best rebounding guard in the league. If I had to pick one point guard in a vacuum, I'd take Westbrook over Curry, Paul and all the rest. . . . Pairing Westbrook and **Victor Oladipo** might not work. But if any backcourt could get by with two nonshooters, it's this one, because their physical tools are off the charts. They'll win games just through force of will. . . . I still don't understand why they moved on from Serge Ibaka. Maybe he had reached his ceiling, but it's a really good ceiling. Now, they're taking a big step backward with **Ersan Ilyasova** and **Domantas Sabonis**. . . . Ilyasova can stretch the floor, but he can't guard most fours in the West for sustained minutes. No way. . . . **Steven Adams** will emerge as a big-time center this year. He's not a one-on-one post scorer or a guy you force-feed, but he can steadily contribute offensively, he's a big plus defensively, he's a tone-setter and he's fearless. His size really pops off the screen when you watch tape, and he moves well.

DANNY BOLINGER/NEAL/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | Last year's disappointing second-round exit would be a pretty solid result this year.

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH QUIN SNYDER

(3rd season with Jazz)

2015-16 RECORD 40-42

(3rd in Northwest)

PG GEORGE HILL* 12.1 PPG; 3.5 APG; 44.1 FG%; 40.8 3FG% →

SG RODNEY HOOD 14.5 PPG; 2.7 APG; 42.0 FG%; 35.9 3FG%

SF GORDON HAYWARD 19.7 PPG; 5.0 RPG; 43.3 FG%; 34.9 3FG%

PF DERRICK FAVORS 16.4 PPG; 8.1 RPG; 1.5 BPG; 51.5 FG%

C RUDY GOBERT 9.1 PPG; 11.0 RPG; 2.2 BPG; 55.9 FG%

BENCH

PG DANTE EXUM* 4.8 PPG; 2.4 APG; 34.9 FG%; 31.4 3FG%

SG ALEC BURKS 13.3 PPG; 3.5 RPG; 41.0 FG%; 40.5 3FG%

PF TREY LYLES 6.1 PPG; 3.7 RPG; 43.8 FG%; 38.3 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION *2014-15 STATS

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Jazz

TELLING NUMBER

84,484

The Jazz added three accomplished veterans in Boris Diaw, George Hill and Joe Johnson. Together, **they've played 84,484 minutes in their careers.** Nobody on Utah's roster ended last season with as many as 14,000.

The new vets

will provide a boost to the Jazz's callow-though enviably talented-young core of Gordon Hayward, Derrick Favors, Rudy Gobert and Dante Exum. Hill gives them stability at point guard, allowing the 21-year-old Exum, who missed last season with

a torn left ACL, to ease back into the rotation. A capable shooter with a long wingspan, Hill can be a role player on offense while seamlessly integrating himself into a swarming defense.

Johnson and Diaw give Utah flexibility in the frontcourt—not to mention loads of playoff experience. (The team has not been to the postseason since 2012.) Johnson

can shoot from the outside and carry the offense for brief stretches. The crafty Diaw will help to match up with small-ball lineups on nights when Gobert is ineffective.

The Jazz enter the season with less hype than other young squads, but if Quin Snyder can find the right combinations with his deep roster, they'll be a tough out every night. —R.N.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Utah



They don't have a star, but they do have one of the deepest rosters in the league. I could easily see them hitting a dominant stretch and cracking 50 wins. . . . Everyone thinks of them as a big team with **Rudy Gobert** and **Derrick Favors**, but they have a bunch of stretch options now with **Trey Lyles**, **Boris Diaw** and even **Joe Johnson**. Their wings are all interchangeable too. . . . They struggled a lot in the clutch last season with **Gordon Hayward** and **Rodney Hood** trying to do too much one-on-one. Now you plug in Johnson as a late option and Diaw as a playmaker and **George Hill** as a complementary shooter, and they're much harder to guard. . . . The Hayward and Hood pairing could be one of the best wing combos for a decade. I think Hood actually has a higher ceiling, and he's among the young two guards who might push into the West All-Star conversation. He has size, ball skills, he can score and he makes good decisions. He'll need to adjust to moving off the ball more this year. . . . Lyles is a candidate as a breakout player. He gets forgotten because they added all the vets, but he can shoot, he can guard all types of fours. . . . Utah is one of the few teams that can still really count on its traditional [big-man] pairing, because Gobert and Favors really pound you on the glass and they defend so well. They can control the pace, post you up, finish around the hoop and take away all your offense inside 10 feet. Gobert is almost a defense by himself. He's the difference between them being O.K. and very good. □



BOTTOM LINE | Now even deeper, the Jazz will be one team no one in the West wants to see in the first round.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Memphis

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH DAVID FIZDALE

(1st season with Grizzlies)

2015-16 RECORD 42-40

(3rd in Southwest)

PG MIKE CONLEY

15.3 PPG; 6.1 APG; 42.2 FG%; 36.3 3FG%

SG TONY ALLEN

8.4 PPG; 4.6 RPG; 1.7 SPG; 45.8 FG%

SF CHANDLER PARSONS*

13.7 PPG; 4.7 RPG; 49.2 FG%; 41.4 3FG%

PF JAMYCHAL GREEN

7.4 PPG; 4.8 RPG; 0.6 SPG; 46.5 FG%

C MARC GASOL

16.6 PPG; 7.0 RPG; 3.8 APG; 46.4 FG%

BENCH

PF ZACH RANDOLPH

15.3 PPG; 7.8 RPG; 2.1 APG; 47.5 FG%

SG VINCE CARTER

6.6 PPG; 2.4 RPG; 38.8 FG%; 34.9 3FG%

PG WADE BALDWIN (R)

14.1 PPG; 5.2 APG; 1.2 SPG; 40.6 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION; (R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Grizzlies

TELLING NUMBER

28

How rampant were injuries in Memphis last season? **The Grizzlies suited up 28 players, an NBA record**—almost enough to fill two rosters. Simply put, the Grizz need good health above all this season.

The player whose well-being will be most

important is Marc Gasol. The 7'1", 255-pound center appeared in only 52 games in 2015-16 but still finished third on the team in total minutes, a sign of just how bad things were. Gasol is one of the best centers in the league when healthy, combining a feathery jumper

with physical D on the block.

Under rookie coach David Fizdale, Gasol, a gifted passer, can also help facilitate a more modern offense. Fizdale, 42, is a disciple of Erik Spoelstra, who's a staunch believer in spreading the floor. This year the Grizzlies—who ranked 27th in threes made—may finally have the roster to do just that. They acquired youngsters Troy

Daniels (a career 43.0% shooter from three) and James Ennis (37.3%), but the real difference maker will be Chandler Parsons, who signed a four-year, \$94 million free-agent deal. Parsons, 27, can unlock all kinds of lineup flexibility for Fizdale—if his right-knee issues don't act up. Needless to say, such concerns will be a recurring theme in Memphis. —R.N.

They have a new coach, and I've heard nothing but good things about David Fizdale as a person. Players love him, people that work with him love him. But nobody has told me that he's a brilliant coach. . . . Their team is kind of a house of cards right now. They have some good players—obviously **Marc Gasol**, **Mike Conley**, they signed **Chandler Parsons**. So on paper they have a chance to be better than they were last year. But all three of those guys have significant injury histories. That could really blow up in their face. . . . If they get something 37 minutes a game, 80 games each—they're in great shape. But they won't. . . . They just don't have much quality depth: **Tony Allen**, **Vince Carter**, **Brandan Wright**. They drafted **Wade Baldwin**, but he's probably not ready to play. The biggest concern I had with him in the draft is that he can be sort of hardheaded and difficult. Not the easiest guy to coach, not super mature. That's one big advantage the Grizz have with Fizdale there. Guys love playing for him and want to go to war for him. . . . **JaMychal Green** is secretly O.K., but their bench is a problem even if there are no injuries. . . . **Zach Randolph** is coming pretty close to the end at this point. For 20 minutes a game scoring on other teams' bench units, he's still effective. But against good players in extended minutes, Z-Bo just can't do it. . . . It's hard to know with Gasol and Conley. They could easily have another few great years, but they're both coming off leg injuries that could either have them fall off in their level of play or miss more games.

JOE MURPHY/NEAL/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | The talent is there for a run at 50 wins. But will it be on the floor often enough?



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ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Houston

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH MIKE D'ANTONI
(1st season with Rockets)

2015-16 RECORD 41-41
(4th in Southwest)

PG PATRICK BEVERLEY
9.9 PPG; 3.4 APG; 43.4 FG%; 40.0 3FG%

SG JAMES HARDEN
29.0 PPG; 7.5 APG; 43.9 FG%; 35.9 3FG% →

SF TREVOR ARIZA
12.7 PPG; 4.5 RPG; 41.6 FG%; 37.1 3FG%

PF RYAN ANDERSON*
17.0 PPG; 6.0 RPG; 42.7 FG%; 36.6 3FG%

C CLINT CAPELA
7.0 PPG; 6.4 RPG; 1.2 BPG; 58.2 FG%

BENCH

SG ERIC GORDON*
15.2 PPG; 2.7 APG; 41.8 FG%; 38.4 3FG%

SF COREY BREWER
7.2 PPG; 2.4 RPG; 38.4 FG%; 27.2 3FG%

PF NENE HILARIO*
9.2 PPG; 4.5 RPG; 1.7 APG; 54.4 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Rockets

TELLING NUMBER

8.1

Houston scored **8.1 fewer points per 100 possessions without James Harden on the court** last season. Some drop-off is expected when a star sits, but the burden placed on Harden by the Rockets is one of the heaviest in the league. Over the last two years no

one has logged more minutes than Harden, who's expected to carry the attack as a scorer and playmaker every second he's on the court.

Houston went all-out this summer to close that 8.1-point gap, hiring Mike D'Antoni—a coach known for

making any lineup potent—and signing Ryan Anderson and Eric Gordon to reinforce its three-point-heavy bombardment. Gordon could be the key pickup, especially if he's able to use more of his off-the-dribble skills than his catch-and-shoot game. A quintet of Anderson, Gordon, Harden, Trevor Ariza and Patrick Beverley would be the best shooting lineup

outside Golden State, though it could probably only survive a handful of minutes outside *NBA 2K*.

Though the defense is certainly a work in progress—Anderson and Gordon don't help in that regard—Houston will surely have a more balanced offense as it looks to return to the playoffs after a 15-win decline last year. —R.N.

I thought it was an interesting approach to the off-season to say, "All right, we're going all in on offense. Screw defense." I don't know how much of that was [GM] Daryl [Morey] or the owner [Leslie Alexander]. There have been rumors that [new coach] Mike D'Antoni wasn't really Daryl's call. But they hired D'Antoni, who's a really good offensive coach, and they signed guys who can shoot. Finally, **James Harden** is going to have some legit shooting around him—he's got **Ryan Anderson**, he's got **Eric Gordon**. They're gonna be awesome on offense. But they're gonna be atrocious on defense. . . . Every time D'Antoni has been a head coach, he hasn't really cared about defense. And as coaches get older, they lose the desire to fight those battles making players play D or get back in transition. If the head coach doesn't care, assistants can scream and show film all they want, but you won't get much buy-in. . . . In a couple of years, that [four-year, \$80 million] deal for Anderson may not look very good, but they'll be hard to guard with him this year. Teams could start guarding Anderson with a wing and then just switch when he screens for Harden. Some coaches would struggle with that, but D'Antoni is savvy enough to counter it. He just won't use Anderson as the screener as much, and use him to space the floor. . . . The big advantage Houston has is that Harden can really beat a switch. He's one of the few guys in the league who has the whole offensive package. You've got to be careful if you're switching onto him because he's so good with the ball.

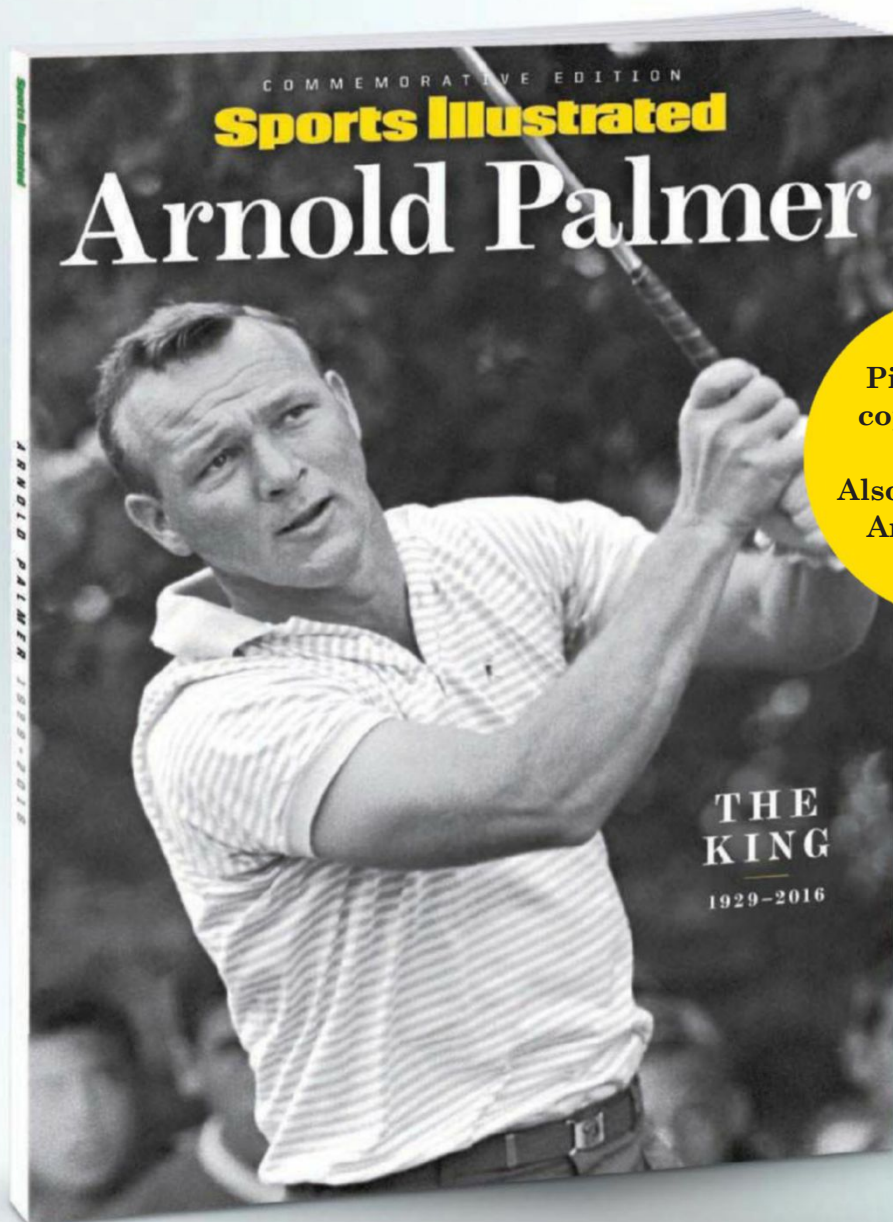
STACY REVERE/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | D'Antoni and Harden make them must-see. That won't necessarily translate to wins.

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ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Minnesota

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH TOM THIBODEAU

(1st season with Timberwolves)

2015-16 RECORD 29-53

(5th in Northwest)

PG RICKY RUBIO

10.1 PPG; 8.7 APG; 2.1 SPG; 37.4 FG%

SG ZACH LAVINE

14.0 PPG; 3.1 APG; 45.2 FG%; 38.9 3FG%

SF ANDREW WIGGINS

20.7 PPG; 3.6 RPG; 45.9 FG%; 30.0 3FG%

PF GORGUI DIENG

10.1 PPG; 7.1 RPG; 1.2 BPG; 53.2 FG%

C KARL-ANTHONY TOWNS

18.3 PPG; 10.5 RPG; 1.7 BPG; 54.2 FG%

BENCH

SF SHABAZZ MUHAMMAD

10.5 PPG; 3.3 RPG; 46.5 FG%; 28.9 3FG%

PF NEMANJA BJELICA

5.1 PPG; 3.5 RPG; 46.8 FG%; 38.4 3FG%

PG KRIS DUNN (R)

16.4 PPG; 6.2 APG; 44.8 FG%; 37.2 3FG%

(R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Timberwolves

TELLING NUMBER

38.9

In his second season with the Spurs, Tim Duncan averaged a **combined 38.9 points, rebounds, assists, blocks and steals per game—a high bar that Karl-Anthony Towns could reach** this year. Towns's cumulative average was

33.2 in 2015-16, when he ran away with the Rookie of the Year award. Towns's game isn't a facsimile of Duncan's—certainly not on defense—but his potential is through the roof. Towns is a legitimate 7-footer who is light on his feet, with a natural athleticism most

big men can only dream of. He can anchor the offense on the block, as a pick-and-roll partner with Kris Dunn, and with his developing outside shot.

Towns's defensive growth will benefit from the arrival of coach Tom Thibodeau. (That's true of his teammates as well. The T-Wolves were 28th in defensive rating. Only one of Thibs's five Bulls squads was

worse than sixth.)

With an embarrassment of lottery riches—the top three scorers last season were all 21 or younger—Minnesota has the potential to become the NBA's next It team. But if the Timberwolves are going to end their 12-year playoff drought—let alone make a splash—Towns will have to more closely emulate Duncan as a two-way force. —R.N.

Tom Thibodeau has great taste in young talent and he found an organization that can benefit from his style and experience. I can't wait to see their prospects transforming into high-level defenders. . . . **Karl-Anthony Towns** will be viewed as a top 10 player at the end of this season. I'll take him over Anthony Davis right now. He's the total package offensively. He can score without being selfish, you can move him all over the court, and he has a great touch for a big guy. . . . **Andrew Wiggins** has the raw talent and youth to be a breakout candidate, but I'm with the people who question whether he will ever really deliver on the hype. He needs to prove that he can contribute within the structure and not just be an open-court guy who gets by on his athleticism. . . . **Kris Dunn** is the best player in this draft; I would have taken him No. 1. You can see the tools and the makeup of an elite guard in this league. He has the personality, the tempo and the pace to his game, the play-to-play intensity. They have a talented group around him with an upward trajectory, so he won't be asked to do too much. . . . That puts **Ricky Rubio**'s future into question. He is a very good player, but they'll have trouble trading him for value because everyone knows they have Dunn. They don't need to rush it: Rubio is an excellent defender, and he can help set the tone. . . . **Zach LaVine** doesn't guard well enough to start. He should be a designated scorer and a spark plug off the bench. Thibodeau will either help turn him into a better defender and take his game to the next level, or neglect him because he still can't stop anybody.

DAVID SHERMAN/NEAL/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | The team to watch in 2019-20 would do well to finish in the top eight this year.



POINTS TAKEN

Wiggins raised his scoring to 20.7 points per game—the highest average by a perimeter player in T-Wolves history.

Photograph by
Nathaniel S. Butler
NBAE/Getty Images



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Dallas

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH RICK CARLISLE
(9th season with Mavericks)

2015-16 RECORD 42-40
(2nd in Southwest)

PG DERON WILLIAMS
14.1 PPG; 5.8 APG; 41.4 FG%; 34.4 3FG%

SG WESLEY MATTHEWS
12.5 PPG; 3.1 RPG; 38.8 FG%; 36.0 3FG%

SF HARRISON BARNES*
11.7 PPG; 4.9 RPG; 46.6 FG%; 38.3 3FG% →

PF DIRK NOWITZKI
18.3 PPG; 6.5 RPG; 44.8 FG%; 36.8 3FG%

C ANDREW BOGUT*
5.4 PPG; 7.0 RPG; 1.6 BPG; 62.7 FG%

BENCH

PG J.J. BAREA
10.9 PPG; 4.1 APG; 44.6 FG%; 38.5 3FG%

SG SETH CURRY*
6.8 PPG; 1.5 APG; 45.5 FG%; 45.0 3FG%

SF JUSTIN ANDERSON
3.8 PPG; 2.4 RPG; 0.5 APG; 40.6 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Mavericks

TELLING NUMBER

10.1

Despite having ample salary-cap space, Dallas has failed to reel in big-name free agents in recent years: Deron Williams, Dwight Howard, DeAndre Jordan and Hassan Whiteside, just to name a few. In that sense Harrison Barnes is a significant departure from

the trend—even if **the Mavs' big-ticket signing has averaged just 10.1 points**

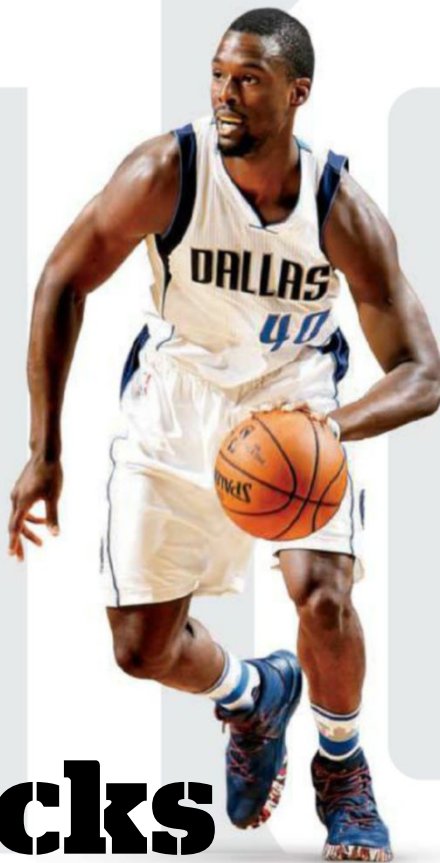
in his four-year career and comes at the steep price of \$94 million over four seasons.

It has been a long time since the Mavs have had a reliable perimeter creator to pair with

Dirk Nowitzki, who, even with declining efficiency, has been the biggest factor in keeping their attack afloat. The hope is that Barnes, 24, can reduce the burden on the 38-year-old Nowitzki and become a swingman scorer who does more than simply shoot threes from the corner—which was largely his role with Golden State. While he has a versatile all-around game, it's not clear whether

he can handle more elevated responsibilities.

Working in Barnes's favor is the eccentric genius of Rick Carlisle, who can coax points out of a shoebox and a gum wrapper. Barnes doesn't have to become a 20-point scorer right away, but he needs to show strong signs that he can eventually if he's going to become a key part of Dallas's post-Dirk success. —R.N.



Rick Carlisle is one of the three or four best coaches in the league. He gets a ton out of that team every year. So I think they'll definitely be around .500. . . . As long as **Dirk Nowitzki** is out there, that's something. His ability to shoot and play pick-and-pop still gives them an advantage. . . . **Harrison Barnes** is a solid player. I'm sure he'll put up better numbers than he did in Golden State, but if they're expecting him to emerge as an All-Star now that he's getting more shots, I think they're going to be a little bit underwhelmed. . . . **Andrew Bogut**'s good, he's just not going to play 82 games. He'll probably play closer to 60, and in 15 of them he probably won't be feeling great and will therefore give a lackluster effort. I don't want to blame it on him, because his body's messed up. But when his juices are flowing, he's strong, he's tough, he's a great rim protector, very savvy on defense, and he can really pass. . . . **Justin Anderson** is gonna be good. I wonder how long a leash Carlisle will have with him. Rick prefers to play two smaller guards who are good pick-and-roll players, and that's not Justin. If he does that, maybe Justin will get squeezed a little bit. I actually think he's almost as good a player as Barnes. Maybe not as good as a scorer, but definitely at rebounding and shot blocking. . . . **Deron Williams** is O.K. He's not what he once was, but Carlisle does really well creating opportunities for point guards. If you told someone five years ago that Marvin Williams would be a better NBA player than Deron Williams, I don't think they would have believed you.

DANNY BOLINGER/NEAL/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | Good news: They won't get bounced in the first round again. Bad news: Because they won't make it there.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up New Orleans

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH ALVIN GENTRY

(2nd season with Pelicans)

2015-16 RECORD 30-52

(5th in Southwest)

PG JRUE HOLIDAY*

16.8 PPG; 6.0 APG; 43.9 FG%; 33.6 3FG%

SG BUDDY HIELD (R)

25.0 PPG; 5.7 RPG; 50.1 FG%; 45.7 3FG%

SF SOLOMON HILL

4.2 PPG; 2.8 RPG; 44.7 FG%; 32.4 3FG%

PF ANTHONY DAVIS

24.3 PPG; 10.3 RPG; 2.0 BPG; 49.3 FG%

C OMER ASIK

4.0 PPG; 6.1 RPG; 0.3 BPG; 53.3 FG%

BENCH

PG TIM FRAZIER

5.1 PPG; 3.2 APG; 2.2 RPG; 33.3 3FG%

SG TYREKE EVANS

15.2 PPG; 6.6 APG; 5.2 RPG; 43.3 3FG%

PF TERRENCE JONES*

8.7 PPG; 4.2 RPG; 45.2 FG%; 31.6 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS *OUT INDEFINITELY FOR FAMILY REASONS

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Pelicans

TELLING NUMBER

489

Of the eight players who took at least 100 three-pointers for the Pelicans last season, only two are with them to start the season: Anthony Davis and Dante Cunningham. Ryan Anderson and Eric Gordon, their most prolific shooters, are gone. (When Jrue Holiday will

return is unclear.)

Those **six absent players combined to make 489 threes**, or 69.7% of the team's total. New forward Lance Stephenson hit 38.5% of his treys in 2015-16—but only 17.1% the season before. Terrence Jones isn't realistically a

stretch four. Only Langston Galloway is serviceable from deep—but he's awful from everywhere else. So the Pels' shooting hopes rest on their first-round pick from Oklahoma, Buddy Hield.

They shouldn't have so much trouble scoring with a game-wrecker like Anthony Davis, whose overall play suffered last year from the increased load he shouldered

on defense. The departures of Anderson and Gordon will help at that end. But unless Gentry can figure out how to space the floor for his best player, New Orleans will be hard-pressed to improve last year's 18th-ranked offense. Davis—who entered last season 3 of 27 from three but then knocked down 35 of 108—shouldn't have to carry the burden from the perimeter, too. —R.N.

Alvin Gentry and the offense can bounce back to a degree. Last year they had to play so many guys that aren't even close to NBA-caliber offensive players. That said, I wonder if they'll be good enough defensively, because Alvin's going to put lineups out there based on offense. . . . They have **Jrue Holiday**, but he's going to miss some time because his wife [retired U.S. soccer player Lauren] has a [brain tumor]. So **Tim Frazier**'s their starting point guard. I love Timmy; he'll play O.K. But it's not ideal when your starting point guard is a backup. . . . At the two, **Tyreke Evans**. Tyreke is solid. If they can find enough other guys who can shoot to put out there with him, he could be decent anchoring the second unit. . . . **Buddy Hield** can shoot, but I don't think he's going to be all that good an NBA player. Hield is a very good spot-up shooter; he's a decent shooter off some movement. He's not a great guy sprinting off a pindown for a catch-and-shoot three off elevation. But if they expect him to create for people, or be really hard to guard, or impact the game defensively, I don't see that coming. . . . They signed [small forward] **Solomon Hill**, and he's an O.K. player. He's sort of a poor man's Jae Crowder, but with kind of a bad attitude. . . . They signed **Lance Stephenson** also, so he's in this weird two-three mix. Lance is like Evans in a lot of ways. If I'm them, I'm a little worried about what I'm concocting there. . . . **Anthony Davis** doesn't look like he's in shape a lot of times, and then he's hurt a lot. But he can't play any worse than last year.



BOTTOM LINE | After a huge step back, they will inch toward the playoffs—but likely fall short.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Phoenix

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH EARL WATSON

(2nd season with Suns)

2015-16 RECORD 23-59

(4th in Pacific)

PG ERIC BLEDSOE

20.4 PPG; 6.1 APG; 45.3 FG%; 37.2 3FG%



SG DEVIN BOOKER

13.8 PPG; 2.6 APG; 42.3 FG%; 34.3 3FG%

SF T.J. WARREN

11.0 PPG; 3.1 RPG; 0.8 SPG; 50.1 FG%

PF JARED DUDLEY*

7.9 PPG; 3.5 RPG; 47.8 FG%; 42.0 3FG%

C TYSON CHANDLER

7.2 PPG; 8.7 RPG; 0.7 BPG; 58.3 FG%

BENCH

PG BRANDON KNIGHT

19.6 PPG; 5.1 APG; 41.5 FG%; 34.2 3FG%

C ALEX LEN

9.0 PPG; 7.6 RPG; 0.8 BPG; 42.3 FG%

SF P.J. TUCKER

8.0 PPG; 6.2 RPG; 1.3 SPG; 41.1 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Suns

TELLING NUMBER

96%

Despite playing for three teams in five seasons and logging time both on and off the ball, Brandon Knight has really only known one role: starter. The 24-year-old **Knight has started 96.0% of his games**, but he will shift from being the Man to being the sixth

man under coach Earl Watson.

The Suns traded for Knight in February 2015, viewing him as a long-term partner for explosive guard Eric Bledsoe. Last year rookie Devin Booker emerged as Phoenix's most promising long-term asset when both Knight and

Bledsoe missed time with injuries. While starting the three ex-Kentucky guards together was an option, Watson decided to spread out his playmakers by demoting Knight to the second unit. The move showcases Booker, a star in the making, and gives Phoenix a bigger look in its starting lineup. Meanwhile, staggering Bledsoe and Knight ensures that the young Suns always have a steady

hand on the court while also ensuring that Knight, who is at his best with the ball in his hands, is actively involved in the offense rather than standing and watching.

Knight took the news in stride, publicly praising Watson's honesty, and the coach returned the favor by hailing Knight's sacrifice. Nevertheless, the trade rumor mill immediately kicked into gear. —B.G.



This is a wait-and-see team as Earl Watson [who is beginning his first full season] gets his bearings. He has a bunch of pretty good guards who should help ease his transition. He'll probably turn those guys loose, get up and down and see what happens. . . . They have two rosters in one: a roster of vets and a roster of all their recent draft picks. They'll probably try to win out of the gate, and if something goes wrong, they'll just shift to a youth movement. . . .

Devin Booker and **Eric Bledsoe** are their best backcourt pairing. I'd hang up the phone if anyone called to ask for Booker. He's their top asset. He has a higher ceiling than guys like CJ McCollum and Bradley Beal. It's really hard not to get excited about this kid. He's 19, he's shown a high-level makeup, he's smooth on the ball, he's very calm and has a great pace to his game. . . . [Lottery-pick forwards] **Dragan Bender** and **Marquese Chriss** didn't show enough in summer league. Bender was one of the biggest disappointments—turnovers, bad decisions, not hitting his shots. I wouldn't have used a top five pick on Bender. He's a totally different player from a guy like Kristaps Porzingis. Chriss isn't going to be a player unless he can extend his range. You can see some athleticism and highlight plays, but he can go 10 possessions without making an impact. . . . They added **Jared Dudley** and **Leandro Barbosa** because their locker room was a mess. Those are two great chemistry guys. . . . **Alex Len** still hasn't shown much progress. He's 7' 1" and shoots 42%. Come on. I don't know what he does that's helpful at all.

JOE MURPHY/NEAL/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | The guard-heavy team will run—right back into the lottery.

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH MICHAEL MALONE
(2nd season with Nuggets)

2015-16 RECORD 33-49
(4th in Northwest)

PG EMMANUEL MUDIAY
12.8 PPG; 5.5 APG; 36.4 FG%; 31.0 3FG%

SG GARY HARRIS
12.3 PPG; 2.9 RPG; 46.9 FG%; 35.4 3FG%

SF DANILO GALLINARI
19.5 PPG; 5.3 RPG; 41.0 FG%; 36.4 3FG%

PF KENNETH FARIED
12.5 PPG; 8.7 RPG; 0.9 BPG; 55.8 FG%

C NIKOLA JOKIĆ
10.0 PPG; 7.0 RPG; 2.4 APG; 51.2 FG%

BENCH

PG JAMEER NELSON
7.7 PPG; 4.9 APG; 36.8 FG%; 29.9 3FG%

SG WILL BARTON
14.4 PPG; 5.8 RPG; 43.2 FG%; 34.5 3FG%

PF DARRELL ARTHUR
7.5 PPG; 4.2 RPG; 1.4 APG; 45.2 FG%

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Nuggets

TELLING NUMBER

\$38.3 MILLION

In 2011 the Nuggets became the rare team to jettison a superstar—Carmelo Anthony—and still improve. Now, though, they might want to consider the opposite approach while hoping for the same result. Denver has some intriguing

pieces on friendly contracts: **Danilo Gallinari, Kenneth Faried and Wilson Chandler will make a relatively paltry \$38.3 million** and they're the team's top three earners. It may be time to package some players for a big name.

GM Tim Connelly

flirted with a megatrade last season, inquiring about the Clippers' Blake Griffin. In Gary Harris and Nikola Jokić, the Nuggets have promising young players who could take their games to the next level by playing alongside a franchise centerpiece. And a team looking to unload a max player—maybe the Clips look to rebuild? Maybe Kevin Love's Finals

honeymoon ends?—could do worse than picking up some affordable rotation players with high upsides.

Outside of its transactional potential, the Nuggets' roster should take a step forward this season, especially if Emmanuel Mudiay continues his hot three-point shooting from the final six weeks of last season, when he averaged 16.5 points. —R.N.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Denver

If they're going to make the playoffs, it's because **Emmanuel Mudiay** makes a gigantic jump—a Most Improved Player type of jump. His development is the biggest factor in determining their direction. He is great at applying constant pressure, kind of like **Goran Dragić**, and he'll generate offense with his defense, but he needs to improve as a shooter. . . . People don't talk about **Gary Harris** because he doesn't have a ton of flash. He is never going to be an All-Star, but he's a 10-year starter. He complements Mudiay very well because of his shooting, and they can be interchangeable defensively. . . . Drafting **Jamal Murray** [out of Kentucky] gives them a really promising guard trio. Any two of those guys can play together; they have all the boxes checked, whether it's playmaking, shooting, pick-and-rolls. . . . **Will Barton** always brings energy and finds ways to impact the game. He's long and aggressive, with that herky-jerky game. He's effective in his own way, and he's fun to watch. . . . Denver has been stuck in a rut with both **Danilo Gallinari** and **Wilson Chandler** suffering injuries. I think it's time for them to move on from Chandler. He brings a lot of the same things as Gallinari, but Gallinari is better across the board. . . . I don't see **Kenneth Faried** as a starter on a good team. His skill set is more like a small-ball five, but he's not a good enough defender to make that work. . . . **Nikola Jokić** is a fantastic passer and playmaker for a big man. I love the people who compare him with the Gasol brothers. He has a great feel and a huge basketball IQ. I'd give him 82 starts and big minutes.



BOTTOM LINE | An improving roster won't be enough to end Denver's four-year playoff drought.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Sacramento

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH DAVE JOERGER

(1st season with Kings)

2015-16 RECORD 33-49

(3rd in Pacific)

PG DARREN COLLISON

14.0 PPG; 4.3 APG; 48.6 FG%; 40.1 3FG%

SG ARRON AFFLALO*

12.8 PPG; 3.7 RPG; 44.3 FG%; 38.2 3FG%

SF RUDY GAY

17.2 PPG; 6.5 RPG; 46.3 FG%; 34.4 3FG%

PF WILLIE CAULEY-STEIN

7.0 PPG; 5.3 RPG; 1.0 BPG; 56.3 FG%

C DEMARCUS COUSINS

26.9 PPG; 11.5 RPG; 1.6 SPG; 45.1 FG%

BENCH

SG BEN MCLEMORE

7.8 PPG; 2.2 RPG; 42.9 FG%; 36.2 3FG%

PG TY LAWSON*

5.7 PPG; 3.6 APG; 39.3 FG%; 33.3 3FG%

C KOSTA KOUFOS

6.8 PPG; 5.4 APG; 0.9 BPG; 53.2 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Kings

TELLING NUMBER

266

DeMarcus Cousins is tightening his grasp on two titles: the NBA's most talented center and its most tortured. Since the two-time All-Star arrived in 2010-11, the Kings have missed the playoffs every season. The franchise's .345 winning percentage during Cousins's

career ranks 28th, topping only the Timberwolves' and Sixers'. During the last six seasons **Cousins has appeared in 266 losses, the most by a player with a single team.** (Four others have appeared in more defeats, but they've enjoyed at least one change in scenery.)

Cousins, meanwhile, has been stuck in Sacramento through an ugly ownership change and multiple front-office regimes. This season he will play for Dave Joerger, the sixth coach of his career, and with a cast of teammates that isn't much better than last season's 33-win outfit. Despite having Cousins to build around, the Kings have a hole

at point guard, limited three-point shooting and an excess of homogeneous combo forwards. Given that GM Vlade Divac has used three first-round picks on centers in the last two drafts, perhaps the plan isn't to build around their 26-year-old franchise big man, but to start preparing for what comes next. Is Cousins finally inching closer to an escape? —B.G.



Dave Joerger might be their biggest free-agent addition. That's good and bad. He's a nice coach with a solid track record, but they really needed a big talent infusion. . . . I expect Joerger to play with two bigs like he did in Memphis, just because they have DeMarcus Cousins and so many other power forwards and centers. It will be hard for Joerger to play pace-and-space because their wings and guards are so poor. . . . Joerger will use Cousins like he used Marc Gasol in Memphis: Put him on the elbow and let him create. But you want to put him in the post too. He can get you points from everywhere. . . . Willie Cauley-Stein is not a perfect all-around player, but he brings length and tons of activity. Still, playing Cousins and Cauley-Stein together isn't great because that puts two guys without true three-point range on the court. . . . If they want to win, they would be better off giving Rudy Gay minutes as a stretch four, but then they're just burying the young guys. [Rookie] Skal Labissiere is probably the best four for them; you could see him developing into a good shooter down the road. . . . They won't miss Rajon Rondo at all. Darren Collison might not be able to put up Rondo's numbers, but he'll have a much better impact on their team as a whole. Rondo had the ball in his hands way too much. . . . They have enough average or below-average defenders in their rotation that it's hard to take them seriously. It's hard to even pick out their best lineup of five defensive players. They'll have to play a little bit slower or they could give up 118 points on any night.

THE ARON W. HENDERSON/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | The roster will be big. The win total will not.

“*Playing Through the Whistle* isn’t merely the history of an American town, but American history itself.”

—MARK KRIEGEL, author of *Namath* and *Pistol*

Aliquippa made the steel that built America, and made Mike Ditka, Tony Dorsett, and Darrelle Revis, too. From a *Sports Illustrated* senior writer, comes a moving epic of football and industrial America.

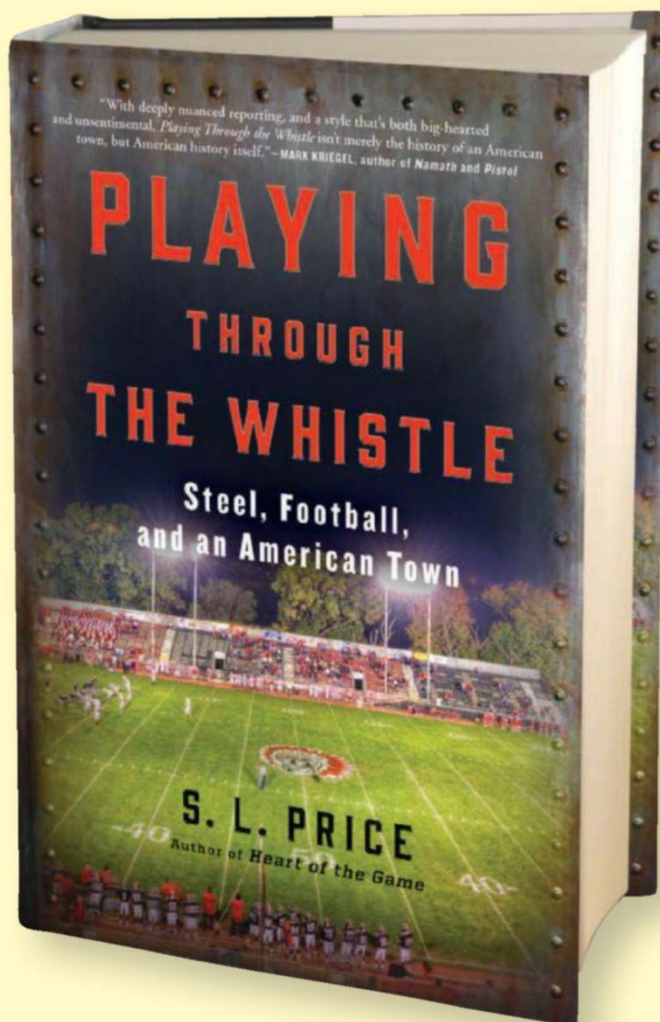
“Price thoroughly explores the football saga . . . but this is no mere sports story . . . [It] is really that of America’s Rust Belt in poignant miniature.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS
(starred review)

“Mind-blowing research and gorgeous storytelling . . .

With football as his lens, Price transports you to the glory days of an iconic American steel town, and envelops you in the saga of its ultimate demise.”

—JEANNE MARIE LASKAS,
New York Times bestselling author
of *Concussion*



“An evocative, wistful journey through decades of American struggle and achievement and loss.”

—DAVID MARANISS,
author of *When Pride Still Mattered* and *Once in a Great City*

IN BOOKSTORES NOW



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Los Angeles

PROJECTED LINEUP | 2015-16 stats

COACH LUKE WALTON

(1st season with Lakers)

2015-16 RECORD 17-65

(5th in Pacific)

PG D'ANGELO RUSSELL

13.2 PPG; 3.3 APG; 41.0 FG%; 35.1 3FG%

SG JORDAN CLARKSON

15.5 PPG; 4.0 RPG; 43.3 FG%; 34.7 3FG%

SF LUOL DENG*

12.3 PPG; 6.0 RPG; 45.5 FG%; 34.4 3FG%

PF JULIUS RANDLE

11.3 PPG; 10.2 RPG; 0.7 SPG; 42.9 FG%

C TIMOFEY MOZGOV*

6.3 PPG; 4.4 RPG; 0.8 BPG; 56.5 FG%

BENCH

SG LOU WILLIAMS

15.3 PPG; 2.5 APG; 40.8 FG%; 34.4 3FG%

SF BRANDON INGRAM (R)

17.3 PPG; 6.8 RPG; 44.2 FG%; 41.0 3FG%

PF LARRY NANCE JR.

5.5 PPG; 5.0 RPG; 0.9 SPG; 52.7 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Lakers

TELLING NUMBER

5.8

Lakers fans were understandably befuddled when GM Mitch Kupchak opened the free-agency period by signing Timofey Mozgov to a four-year, \$64 million contract. Mozgov?!? Sure, the 7'1" center had just won a championship with the Cavaliers,

but he was barely a factor during the title run. After losing his starting job during an injury-plagued season, **Mozgov averaged just 5.8 minutes in the postseason** and didn't even get on the court eight times.

Kupchak and first-time coach Luke Walton are

hoping that Mozgov, 30, still has some quality basketball left in the tank. After finishing with the league's worst defense, the Lakers wasted no time moving on from ponderous Roy Hibbert, whose clunky offensive game also made him a poor fit. While Mozgov isn't necessarily the most agile center either, he's a capable finisher in pick-and-rolls, and he has a

knack for creating opportunities with off-ball cuts. He has even spent some time in the preseason honing a three-point stroke.

This new marriage is bound to face some tough moments, given the Lakers' youth and lack of defensive talent, but Mozgov is excited to be back in his team's plans. "[Walton] said I'm going to play a lot," he told the *L.A. Daily News*. "I really like it."—B.G.

The best-case scenario is that **D'Angelo Russell** becomes a high-level starter, **Brandon Ingram** is in the Rookie of the Year mix, and they get a clear sense for how **Julius Randle** fits into their plans. And they still might not win 25 games. . . . They should change more than any other team, with Kobe Bryant retiring and [coach] Luke Walton taking over for Byron Scott. They'll play fast, take more threes, run less isolation and have a lot more opportunity for their young prospects, which is how they should have played last year. . . . Russell is their most important player. The style shift will work if he makes it work, and it will fail if he's not quite ready. Give him a mulligan for last year because Bryant dominated everything. If Russell "gets it," he'll be a superstar. He's ready for a breakout. . . . Ingram has off-the-charts talent, but it will take him a few years to be an impact guy. His lack of strength will hurt him, and he needs to tighten up his handle. I see him as a skilled all-around offensive player but not quite elite. . . . Randle has the biggest question marks. Is he a starter? A guy off the bench? A trade chip? Maybe Walton sees Randle as a Draymond Green type. He can handle the ball a little bit, but can he make the reads? I don't think Randle has shown a clear skill set. He's pretty easy to guard. He goes left over and over, and he goes to his spin move over and over. . . . **Larry Nance Jr.** could wind up being more important than Randle. He's a more natural fit as a small five, he plays with great energy, and he's an above-the-rim threat. Everything he does translates to winning.

JUAN OCAMPO/NEAL/GETTY IMAGES



BOTTOM LINE | Coach Luke Walton won 73 games with the Dubs last year. It might take him three years to win that many here.

BRETT FAVRE

Takes On The Pain

A Q&A on Life After the NFL

Brett Favre set a lot of records during his legendary 20-year career. In addition to being the only "Grandfather" actively playing in the NFL at the age of 40, he remains the undisputed king of being sacked.¹ Holding the #1 position is nothing to envy; if it could break, sprain, or cause pain, Favre's body experienced it. Today, Favre maintains an active lifestyle and is in better shape than ever. He serves as a brand ambassador for Copper Fit, the copper-infused* compression garments that help reduce muscle and joint pain.

If it could break, sprain, or cause pain, Favre's body experienced it.

Q: Can you still throw an 80-yard pass?

A: In my mind I can, but no. I can throw 50 yards as well as anyone, but the window is closing. Soon it will be 30 and I'm thinking, 'Brett, be happy with that.'

Q: How much is being healthy and staying active part of your lifestyle now?

A: It's more important now than when I played. I took a lot of things for granted. We all do when we're young. As you get older, you get up a little slower...aches and pains seem to be more common...sometimes for no apparent reason. Sure, I've got more reason than most, but I can be brushing my teeth and some pain hits and I think 'Wow, where'd that come from?'



Brett sports Copper Fit Back PRO and Sleeves while coaching football at the local high school.

"I can be brushing my teeth, some pain hits and I think, 'Wow, where'd that come from?'"



Favre works on the farm in a Copper Fit Elbow Sleeve.

Q: You've been ranked the #1 toughest player in the NFL by The Bleacher Report. How do you handle aging with an injury list a mile long?

A: No question that life in the NFL was tough, but I think I'm in better shape today than when I played. I'm smarter about what I eat and how I train. By no means am I in football shape. I don't have the trainers and physical therapists like I used to. For today's aches and pains, and I have my fair share of them, I use Copper Fit.

¹NFL Career Sacked Leaders, Times Sacked (first recorded in 1969), Pro-Football-Reference.com http://www.pro-football-reference.com/leaders/pass_sacked_career.htm

Compression garments have long been known for providing muscle and circulatory support. For Favre, anything that provides support and helps take on the pain is a great asset.



Copper-Infused* Compression Sleeves

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*Reduces odor in the garment's fabric



2016-17 Viewers' Guide



ENTERTAINMENT RANKINGS

Who will be the most fun to watch this season?

BEN GOLLIVER

LeBron James and the Cavaliers beat the Warriors in a small-ball-heavy Finals that saw the teams taking turns running each other off the court. Even in defeat, the Dubs' major philosophical contributions to the sport were reinforced. Basketball is simply prettier and more enjoyable when the pace is up, the ball is moving, playmakers have room to operate, positions are fluid and points pour in from beyond the arc. Golden State's 2015 title produced a wave of copycats, and that trend will continue.

Here's how the NBA shapes up in terms of entertainment value, from "top trending topic" to "cut the cord." Criteria include projected success, style of play, firepower, age, health, coaching and personality.

1 WARRIORS The most awe-inspiring and diabolical lineup in memory replaced its weakest link with an ultra-efficient four-time scoring champion who is desperate to win his first title. Kevin Durant will help the Dubs rewrite the record books . . . again.

2 CAVALIERS LeBron James and Kyrie Irving are scintillating in their own right. But the must-see factor is magnified by a made-for-Hollywood reality: Cleveland is the only thing standing between Golden State and the championship.

3 CLIPPERS Don't get too hung up on feelings of déjà vu. The "same old Clippers" still have superstar talent, superb inside-outside balance and high-level chemistry honed over hundreds of games together.

4 TRAIL BLAZERS A surprise season ended with an electrifying second-round series against the Warriors that had the feel of a sibling rivalry. The best part: Damian Lillard and his chippy cast want no part of the "little brother" label.

5 THUNDER Russell Westbrook will be asked to do more for his team than any other NBA player this season, and he couldn't be happier about it. Buckle up and brace for delightful turbulence.

6 CELTICS The East's top competition for the Cavaliers has every base covered: Isaiah Thomas sparks a solid attack, Al Horford plugs in perfectly to an elite defense and Brad Stevens rounds it out with superior game management.

7 ROCKETS Last season's biggest disappointment could be in for a swift turnaround. New coach Mike D'Antoni has pledged to further empower a refocused James Harden. Defense remains optional.

8 TIMBERWOLVES Karl-Anthony Towns is a unanimous pick as the NBA's Next Big Thing, while Andrew Wiggins and rookie Kris Dunn serve as stellar running mates.

9 SPURS There's no replacing Tim Duncan, but Gregg Popovich has had years to prep for a transition. Kawhi Leonard and LaMarcus Aldridge are

strong pillars, and Pau Gasol's passing makes him a natural fit.

10 RAPTORS Kyle Lowry & Co. compensate for a lack of polish with charming perseverance.

11 JAZZ Their stylistic nonconformity—big, imposing and unapologetically slow—is welcome in a league filled with wannabe Warriors.

12 BULLS There's a Jenga-like vibe to a foundation built on Jimmy Butler, Rajon Rondo and Dwyane Wade. Cramped spacing, bouts of lackadaisical D and a surplus of healthy egos should send this crashing down eventually.

13 PELICANS After another season-ending injury and a number of notable free-agency defections around him, **Anthony Davis** has become the NBA's most underdiscussed superstar. Don't forget about the Brow!

14 KNICKS While there's no logic to the shaky roster Phil Jackson has assembled, Kristaps Porzingis is so fascinating and novel that he single-handedly makes up for most of the faults.

15 KINGS Drama-loving rubberneckers rejoiced when owner Vivek Ranadive admitted that ex-coach George Karl tried to trade DeMarcus Cousins for months. Without a quality floor general, there's no telling when the chaos will end.

16 PACERS In search of more offense around Paul George, Larry Bird has changed his coach, point guard and much of his frontline. Remember the words of another famous Hoosier, John Wooden: Never mistake activity for achievement.

17 WIZARDS With fired coach Randy Wittman no longer around to blame, the pressure falls on star guards John Wall and Bradley Beal to pull the Wiz out of their frustrating inconsistency.

18 HAWKS Dwight Howard brings name recognition, but his explosiveness and likability have both declined badly since his Orlando peak.

19 LAKERS Kobe Bryant dubbed himself Vino because he aged like fine wine. His successors, D'Angelo Russell and **Brandon Ingram**, are both under 21. Call them Sprite and Schweppes?

20 GRIZZLIES Memphis lacks the personnel or depth to pull off a long-delayed transition to small ball in one season.

21 MAVERICKS Like an aging rock star, Mark Cuban can't escape the shadow of his 2011 title-winning smash hit. His latest album is blah, just like the last three or four, and not even Dirk Nowitzki can save it.

22 HORNETS Kemba Walker's career year, fueled by better spacing around him, keyed a much-improved offense. Will that progress continue after Nicolas Batum and Marvin Williams cashed in this summer?

23 BUCKS Look for the oft-hyped Giannis Antetokounmpo to make his first All-Star team. Unfortunately, his

supporting cast doesn't really accentuate his strengths.

24 PISTONS Stan Van Gundy's reshaped roster plays smart, effective ball. It just lacks the thrill factor.

25 SUNS At least the franchise's focus has shifted back to developing its cache of high-upside youngsters, headlined by Devin Booker.

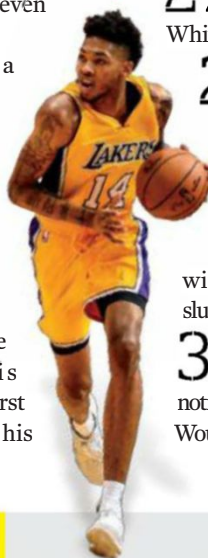
26 76ERS Ben Simmons's preseason foot injury sent Philly's watchability plummeting.

27 HEAT A major off-season talent exodus is great only for Hassan Whiteside fantasy owners. Time to tank?

28 NUGGETS While overloaded with intriguing international prospects, the key veteran pieces don't fit together.

29 MAGIC New coach Frank Vogel summed it up bluntly to ESPN.com: "We might have to win games 68–65." Skip their mucky slugfests unless you love interior defense.

30 NETS Dead last by a mile for the second straight year. Would anyone notice if this cast moved back to New Jersey? Would New Jersey even take them? □



GAMES TO WATCH

Mark these dates in your calendar now

Spurs @ Warriors, Oct. 25, 10:30 p.m.*

The opening-night matchup is both Kevin Durant's Golden State debut and the first game of the post-Tim Duncan era for San Antonio.

Celtics @ Cavaliers, Nov. 3, 8 p.m.

The team with the best shot at dethroning

Cleveland in the East gets its initial crack at LeBron & Co.

Bulls @ Heat, Nov. 10, 8 p.m.

Dwyane Wade and Miami didn't split on great terms, but his return should still be an emotional one at American Airlines Arena.

Warriors @ Cavaliers, Dec. 25, 2:30 p.m.

Merry Christmas, Dubs! Your gift is a trip to Cleveland to face the Cavs for the first time since blowing a 3-1 lead in the Finals.

Warriors @ Thunder, Feb. 11, 8:30 p.m.

The highlight of the schedule. Kevin Durant makes his first trip back to Oklahoma City. Wonder if the Durant-Russell Westbrook angle will get played up...

76ers @ Lakers, March 12, 9:30 p.m.

If Ben Simmons is back from his foot injury, this would mark the first time that the No. 1 pick in 2016 and the No. 2 choice, Brandon Ingram, face off.

—Akshay Mirchandani

*All times EST



Dwyane Wade

The Windy City native was always going to be a Bull—it was just a matter of timing

BY ROHAN NADKARNI

THERE'S AN alternate universe in which the Big Three never existed. Maybe in the summer of 2010, LeBron James signs with the Knicks or stays in Cleveland. Perhaps Chris Bosh joins Dirk Nowitzki in Dallas. And Dwyane Wade? In this scenario he signs with the Bulls, teaming up with Derrick Rose, Luol Deng and Joakim Noah to form one of the most stacked teams in the East.

How close that vision came to reality wasn't clear until Wade, now 34, sat down with *The Crossover*, SI's new NBA-focused website, last week. Now, finally suiting up for the team he grew up dreaming of playing for, Wade opened up about the advice he got from Kevin Garnett, his feud with Rajon Rondo and his dislike of winter.

How close were you to signing with Chicago in 2010?

Dwyane Wade: I was very close. In my mind, I was going back home. But things change a little bit when you got Chris Bosh and LeBron James on the phone saying we can play together.



"When Rondo signed with Chicago, I thought, I could see myself there. I want to play with somebody I almost came to blows with because we're both that competitive."

So it was tough. I wanted to be a part of that [Bulls] team, they had some great young talent, and I've always wanted to play at home, but I had to make a decision about championships.

What does it mean to you, after looking up to Michael Jordan, to play shooting guard for the Bulls?

DW: That hasn't even set in. Every day I come [to the United Center], I look up at the banners, I look up at the success this organization has had, and it gives me extra motivation. To me, it's an honor. To have been sitting on my floor watching TV, to have seen my favorite team, my favorite player win a championship, and for me to have said to myself at nine years old, "That's what I want to become," and now to be able to live that dream, I'm just excited.

Kobe Bryant, Tim Duncan and Kevin Garnett are all gone. How weird is it to see these guys you battled against leave the game?

DW: It became real when it was Kobe's last year. For me it was like, This does end. And it really made me start appreciating the moment even more. I'm just enjoying the ride.

You and KG always had an intense relationship.

What will it be like the next time you run into him?

DW: We had some battles with Boston, some battles with KG, some hard fouls, some junk-talking, but there are so many more positive moments. I remember the first time I played KG, early in my rookie season. We started 0-7, and we were down, like, 20 [to the Timberwolves], but I was still going hard, scoring, like, 10 points in a row trying to bring our team back. KG grabbed me after the game, and he told me, "That's the way you go. That's what you do. You never give up. Don't ever show any quit." For a young guy, that was huge.

Speaking of those battles with Boston, how much communication did you have with Rajon Rondo over the summer? What will it be like playing alongside him?

DW: It's going to be fine. We've been able to communicate. Obviously we've been adversaries, but there's always been a mutual respect. When he signed with Chicago, that was one of my real eye-opening moments, and I thought, *I could see myself there*. I want to play with somebody who I almost came to blows with because we're both that competitive.

What are your realistic expectations for this Bulls team?

DW: I want us to have the mentality that we can compete for a championship. I want us to know that we can be as good as anybody in the Eastern Conference. If our goals are the same, there should be nothing stopping us from reaching them.

Are you ready for the winters in Chicago?

DW: No. I'm not. But I'll get through it. I'm a tough guy. □



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